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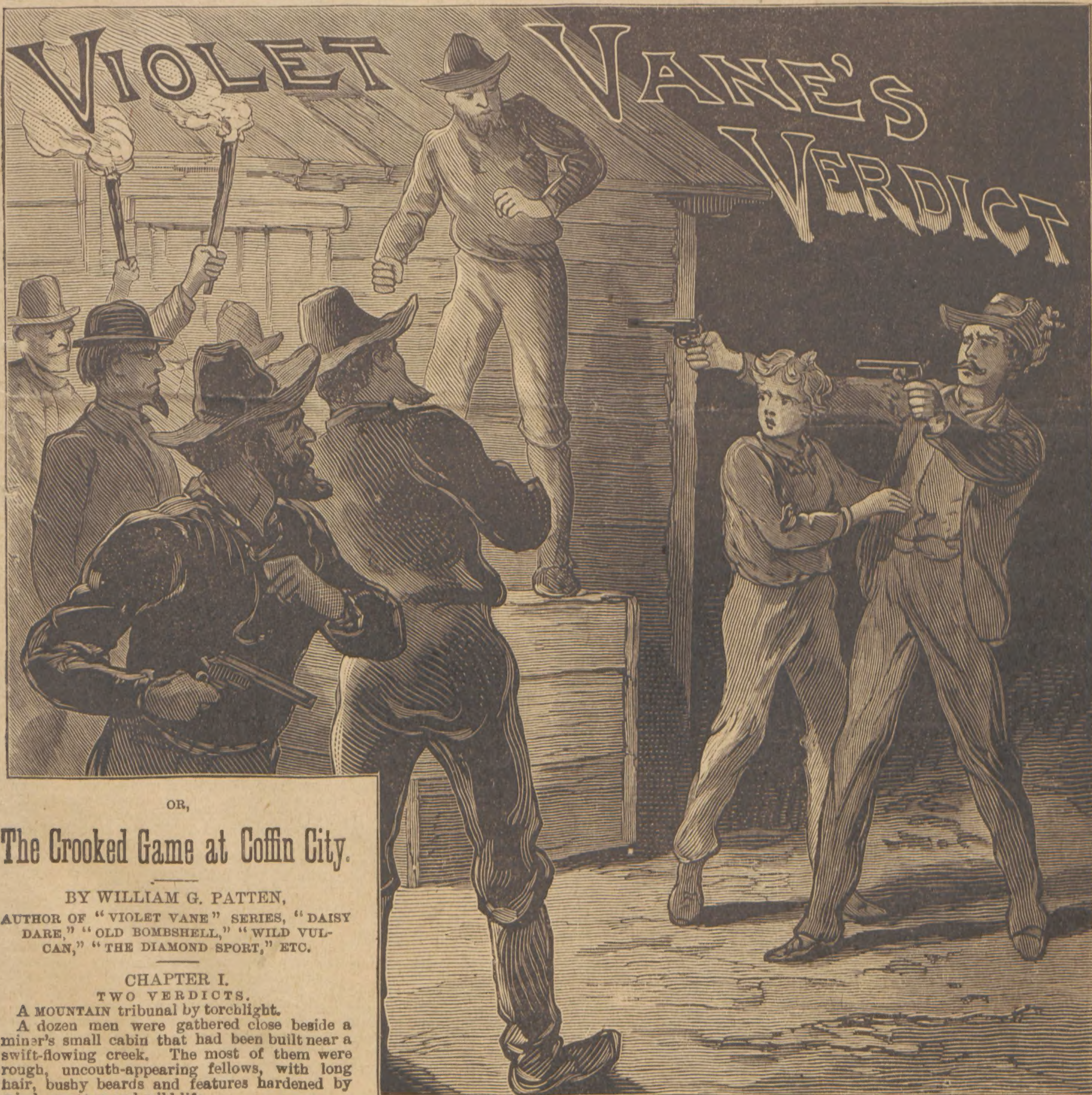
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OR,

The Crooked Game at Coffin City.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE" SERIES, "DAISY
DARE," "OLD BOMBSHELL," "WILD VUL-
CAN," "THE DIAMOND SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TWO VERDICTS.

A MOUNTAIN tribunal by torchlight.

A dozen men were gathered close beside a miner's small cabin that had been built near a swift-flowing creek. The most of them were rough, uncouth-appearing fellows, with long hair, bushy beards and features hardened by wind, weather and wild life.

One of them, however, was smoothly shaven,

"COME HERE, MY LAD! I SAY YOU ARE NOT GUILTY! THAT IS VIOLET VANE'S VERDICT!"

and wore clerical-appearing clothes, but whose face was as hard as those of his companions, although it was now drawn into a look of distressed sadness. The word "hypocrite" was written on his countenance.

Surrounded by the men was a pale-faced boy not over sixteen years of age—a roughly-dressed but attractive lad, with a frank, almost girlish, face. There was a light of fear in his eyes as he gazed at the stern-looking men who hemmed him in and on whose belted weapons the flaring torchlights glinted. He turned appealingly toward the dark-clothed man, but with an expression of helpless sorrow, that individual dropped his head in a despairing manner, veiling his eyes with his thick, black eyebrows.

One of the men, a fat, greasy, liquor-branded individual, lifted above the others by the box which was his tribunal, now arose to his feet, his manner being quite pompous and his air more ridiculous than dignified, although he plainly tried to appear as if he felt a great responsibility resting on his shoulders. When he spoke it was in a voice that sounded like the gurgling of a very hoarse bull frog.

"Feller-citizens of Coffin City," he croaked, with a broad sweep of one short arm, "I hev listened impartially ter ther evvydence in this yere case, feelin' thoroughly detarmined ter see jestice done ter ther extremest limit, let ther chips fall whar they will. I will not deny thet I wuz somewhat favorably impressed by ther 'pearance of ther accused, a mere boy charged with ther grave and awful crime of murder! I will not deny that, feller-citizens, fer I hev er tender heart in my buzzum; but as the evvydence hes piled up afore me, I hev crushed back ther feelin' thet w'd thwart the mechanism of ther law, an' I hev determined ter do my juty even though my own brother stood ther crimynal at ther bar.

"Thar is leetle need of goin' all over ther evvydence thet has been presented, feller-citizens, so I will simply tetch on ther main p'int. Ther hour is gittin' merged torruds midnight an' we hev already spent vallyble time in gittin' at ther plain an' unvarnished facts of ther case.

"Feller-citizens of Coffin City: You wuz all familiar with ther figger of Ole Luckless, ther galoot w'at buildd this yere cabin an' worked ther placer in ther crick. You all know he wuz an ornery, no-'count critter as didn't 'mount ter shucks, but fer all thet he wuz er human bein', an' it falls ter our juty ter see thet his death is properly avenged.

"Ther pris'ner at ther bar, oh my countrymen, kem ter these parts a few short weeks ago an' foun' er home with Ole Luckless, who allus wuz er reg'lar soft-hearted old fool thet'd divvy hafe he hed with ther cuss thet seemed ter want it poerty bad. But leetle did ther ole man know w'at a viper he wuz takin' to his buzzum in this soft-'pearin' kid! Leetle did he think ther han' of ther one he hed fed w'd strike him down!

"Sometime dooin' ther day thet hes jest past Ole Luckless wuz murdered—foully 'sassinated, feller-citizens! Both Lank Ike an' Sweet Jim saw his body layin' stark an' stiff jest inside ther door thar; you, my comrades, hev seen ther blood on ther floor. Whar ther body hes gone no critter kin say, 'less it is this yere boy, an' he won't tell. It is likely he hes secreted it, ter kiver ther traces of his onnatural crime. Though young in years, an' with ther face of innercence, he seems ter be ole in sin.

"Although we mus' admit ther evvydence is mainly circumventional, pards of Coffin City, it is also very black erg'in' ther kid. He tells er rayther pecool'ar yarn 'bout bein' skeered out, an' tryin' ter git erway from these parts, but ther story is so flumsy thet it won't hole watter fer shucks. Thar is no doubt but thet he wuz fleein', like ther guilty critter thet he is—fleein' from ther scene of his most horrerfyin' crime!

"This grief shaken galoot," and the eloquent orator waved a hand toward the now sobbing man in black, "is ther unfortunat uncle of this wretched and misguided youth. Fer some time he hes bin huntin' in vain fer ther boy, an' now he has foun' him, only ter hev his heart torn by ther awful fac's of ther crime with which ther boy's han's are stained. We pity this unlucky uncle of a youthful crimynal—we pity him from ther bottom of our tender heart.

"Out in this yere wile lan' jestice an' punishment swiftly follers convicshun fer a crime. This court is ther court of Jedge Lynch, an' I am ther administerer of jestice. I hev heard ther evvydence, an' arriv' at a decision. Is thar ary derved reason why I sh'dn't announce ther verdict? Ef ary one knows cause, let him now yoop her out ur ferever arter hole his peace."

The man in black slowly arose, still holding his handkerchief to his eyes. In a choked and broken voice he began to speak, but without glancing at the pale-faced, despairing lad.

"Brothers," he snuffled, "for many long and weary years I have been a faithful servant of the Lord, reproving sinners and trying to turn the wayward to the path that leads to eternal salvation—the straight and narrow path. I have passed through many trials and sore afflictions, but never did I dream the Lord would see fit to place such a crushing burden on my weak shoulders as now rests there. Never did I dream He would see fit to permit one of my own kin to stain his hands with human blood. It is a cross heavy to bear, still I praise His blessed name!"

For a moment the speaker paused, seeming choked by the intensity of his emotions. Soon he went on again, falteringly:

"It may be useless for me to again ask leniency for this wayward child of sin, yet I must do so, even though I feel justice should have its course. It is a ter-rible th-thing for one so young to be cut down like the grass, and to perish like the bub-beasts of the field. Look on him with pup-pity, oh my brothers, and consider his (sob) tender years! I shall be crushed—by the terrible thought—thought that lake of eternal fire of which we are told—in the Book of Books. Oh, have mercy (sob) upon this wayward one—this erring child! He knew not what he did—Father in Heaven, he knew not what he did! Scarcely out of short clothes, he (sob) has stained—his hands—with—"

Here the speaker broke down entirely and gave up the attempt.

"It is useless," declared the "judge." "The boy's crime is too great fer pardon. He must suffer ther penalty, an' now I will pernounce ther verdict!"

"Wallace Kenton, this yere court hes foun' you guilty of murder in ther fu'st degree, an' I do hereby pernounce, accordin' to power duly divested in me, thet you are GUILTY, an' you shall be immediately at once't an' without loss of time hung by ther neck tell you are dead, dead, dead! So mote it be."

There was a stir, a murmur, and the rough men reached out eager hands to grasp their intended victim, the trembling, helpless boy. And then—

"Hold! The man who lays hands on that boy dies!"

Clear and distinct came the ringing words. The roughs wheeled with exclamations of dismay, their hands falling toward their weapons.

Within the circle of torchlights stood a man in whose hands gleamed cocked and leveled revolvers. From head to foot he was dressed in black, the sombrero on his head, looped at one side and fastened by a knot of fresh mountain violets, being the same color as his finely-fitting velvet suit. His hands were incased in black kid gloves. The man was of medium height, but a perfect picture of physical perfection. His face was stern, his mustache coal black, as also were his flashing eyes.

Oaths of dismay came from the lips of Judge Lynch's ruffianly gang, and involuntarily they shrunk before the muzzles of the weapons which never quivered a hair in the hands of the dauntless stranger.

"Hands off your barkers, or eat hot lead!" cried the velvet dandy. "I mean old business!"

The hands of the toughs fell from their half-drawn revolvers.

"That is right," slightly bowed the one who held the drop. "I am not the man to be fooled with, for I had rather shoot than talk any time.

"You are a gay crowd of cuckoos, and I have you all spotted. I have been listening to this trial from the outskirts, waiting for the proper time to chip in. For some reason, you have taken this contemptible way to get rid of a friendless boy. I imagine you are hired assassins of that black-clothed, smooth-faced scoundrel who claims to be the boy's uncle. I have the two-faced hypocrite marked and he may see more of me.

"Come here, my lad! I say you are not guilty! That is Violet Vane's verdict."

The boy already had left that circle and hurried to the side of his new friend, while Violet Vane—as the stranger had called himself—still kept his revolvers trained on the ruffianly gang. The daring man spoke a few words to the lad, who immediately hurried round the corner of the cabin and disappeared.

A few moments later the sound of retreating hoofbeats came to the ears of the men, and they knew their prey had escaped them for the time.

"You showed excellent judgment, gentle-

men," came somewhat sneeringly from Violet Vane's lips. You were a dozen to one, but I had a shot for every man—and I never miss! Still I had no desire to take the blood of this gang on my hands, even though it would have been a great service to this part of the country and Coffin City in particular. If you lay a score against me, you will be apt to see me in Coffin City later on.

"I will now bid you good-evening."

Then, still keeping them covered, he backed round the corner and disappeared.

CHAPTER II.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

ONE day, nearly two months after the events related in the foregoing chapter, Adam Jayne, the clerical hypocrite of the smooth face and black clothes, was slowly walking down the main street of the little mining-camp known as Coffin City. Although there was, as usual, a sanctimonious air about the man, his face wore an unusually sour expression, the corners of his mouth being drawn a trifle lower than was customary. Plainly Adam was in anything but a pleasant mood.

Coffin City was not a very large town, and Jayne soon paused in front of a small building, over the door of which hung a sign bearing the following inscription:

"ELIAS SLINK,
Attorney-at-Law."

The "Rev." Adam stood meditating for several moments, as if undecided about entering. At length he muttered;

"The man will want money, but I desire information. Confound him! he is a regular blood-sucker! But he served me well in the past—he found the girl, then he found the boy. The girl is disposed of, and the boy would have been but for that infernal imp who dared interfere at such a confoundedly inopportune moment. Hang him! He said we should see him in Coffin City, but he has not shown his head here. Slink says he has men on track of both Violet Vane and the boy, but I can never tell when Slink tells the truth and when he lies. He has a new story for me every time I see him; and it is always money, money, money. He must think I'm made of money. But when I am successful, as I will be in the end, it will be worth all my trouble and expenditure.

"I believe I will go in and see what new tale Lawyer Slink will have for my ear to-day."

He advanced to the door and pushed his way into the building. Immediately on stepping in from the street, he found himself in a small, square room, meagerly furnished, the most prominent article of furniture being a large, flat-topped table, upon which were spread a mass of manuscripts and newspapers, together with two or three legal-looking books, one of the latter being open.

As Adam entered, the only inmate of the room was sitting with his chair tilted back and his heels resting fairly in the middle of the open book on the table, while the fragrant smoke of a fine cigar he was idly puffing, filled the place.

The instant the occupant of the room saw who his visitor was, his chair was righted and his heels came down with a thump. In another moment he was on his feet, smiling blandly, bowing profoundly and extending a thin, bony hand.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, rolling the cigar between his lips and allowing it to settle in the left corner of his mouth. "It is my highly-esteemed friend and client, the Reverend Adam Jayne! I am glad to see you, sir—heartily glad! I was just thinking of you as you entered."

"The Lord knows I do not doubt it," was the reply, as Jayne touched the hand of the oily lawyer. "But I sadly fear your thoughts were more of my pocketbook than of myself. Ah, hum! Such is the way of this greedy world. They seek after silver and gold, but forget to lay up riches in Heaven, which rust cannot corrupt and which fadeth not away."

Something like a scowl showed on the lawyer's face for an instant, but it quickly vanished, and he smiled as blandly as before, rubbing his bony hands together and rolling the cigar to the other corner of his mouth.

"Plenty of time for that, sir," he bowed. "Meantime, I have to rustle after a little of the corruptible wealth. All the same, it is a very small amount I manage to secure."

"Small! Why, Slink! I have done nothing but fork over money to you since I first engaged you to assist me in searching for my beloved nephew and niece!"

"And do you think I have put it all in my

pocket, sir? Have I not regularly showed you a statement of expenses, which revealed where the money went? I have taken care that it should be expended in a judicious manner. This business has cost—"

"You are quite right, Brother Slink, it has cost."

"But sit down, sir, sit down," and the oily lawyer hastened to place a broken-backed chair for his visitor. "We can talk much more comfortably while sitting than standing. You must be thirsty?" and with clasped hands and forward bent body, Slink was a veritable human interrogation point.

The "Rev." Jayne slowly cleared his throat. "To tell the truth, I am somewhat thirsty," he confessed.

The lawyer hastened to a small closet and quickly brought out a bottle of liquor and two glasses, placing them on the table. Then he sat down opposite his caller.

"I believe the Bible says something about a little wine being good for the stomach's sake?" observed Slink.

"You are right, Brother Slink, such a declaration is to be found in the Good Book, uttered by one of the wise men of God. Mind you, I do not counsel over-indulgence in stimulating drink, but a little is sometimes very invigorating and beneficial."

"Right you are! Help yourself, parson."

Jayne poured out a brimming glass, lifted it to the light and observed its color with a critical eye.

"It's the prime article," assured the lawyer, as he turned out about a third of a glass. "It cost money."

The glasses clinked and the liquor disappeared. Adam Jayne smacked his lips and looked askance at the bottle.

"Prime stuff, eh?" from Slink.

"Yes; and that is what surprises me. How the dev—Dutch can you afford to drink such liquor and smoke such cigars? Why, when I picked you up, you were nothing but a common tramp with scarce a shirt to your back! Your condition has changed, and I think I understand how it comes about. Your practice—"

"My practice has been exceedingly good of late, dear sir," Slink hastened to say, puffing nervously at his cigar. "I have done excellently well since coming to Coffin City, I assure you."

"But I never see any one except myself entering or leaving this den."

"It is not probable you watch the door all the time, dear sir," expostulated Elias, growing more and more nervous, changing the cigar in his mouth several times.

"However, it is business I wish to speak to you about. That is why I was thinking of you."

Deliberately Adam again filled his glass. Slink turned out a small amount, and once more the glasses touched.

"I trust you can tell me of success this time—success in a positive degree. I am tired of being hung on the verge of success, but waiting in vain for what you have repeatedly promised. I am a man of much patience and long suffering, but there is a limit to my endurance."

Slink suddenly bent forward, resting his hands on the table and looking his visitor sharply in the face.

"Can you complain of the manner in which I have served you?" he demanded, speaking as smoothly as ever, an insinuating smile creeping around the corners of his gash-like mouth. "Did I not find the girl for you, and did I not find the boy? I did more than that—I put up the little job—at your suggestion—which would have rid you of the kid but for the interference of that fellow who calls himself Violet Vane. You intimated you would like to get rid of the boy, and—"

The "Rev." Adam held up his hands in horror, as he hastened to interrupt the speaker.

"My dear brother, can it be that you have thus deceived yourself? Your words fill my soul with amazement and righteous indignation! Such terrible thoughts never entered my heart. When I saw the snare into which my dear nephew had fallen through his greed for the gold of his benefactor, my heart was torn with anguish. I pleaded with those stern men to relinquish their purpose, but all to no avail. But for the interference of this Violet Vane—confound—no, bless him!—the poor boy would have been cruelly hanged. His young life would have been extinguished like that of a flower crushed beneath a remorseless foot."

Slink smiled, craftily.

"Your money placed the boy in that position," he asserted. "It certainly cost something to hire those men and to arrange the evidence,

but you came down liberally. I found two fellows who had a grudge against Old Luckless, and they disposed of him. I also found—"

But Adam would have started to his feet. "I cannot listen to this!" he exclaimed. "If you have made such a wicked use of the money I gave you, Brother Slink, I trust you will not distress me by telling me of it. This will cause me to spend many long hours in penitence and prayer."

For the third time he filled his glass. Slink turned out a small amount, as he had done before. Holding up the glass, the lawyer closed one eye and squinted knowingly across the brim with the other.

"I fancy we understand each other pretty well, parson," he observed, removing his cigar from his mouth. "Here is success to your plans."

The glasses clinked again and they swallowed the liquor.

"Ah!" exclaimed Jayne, again smacking his lips. "That warms the heart in a man's bosom. It gives a Christian a sort of feeling of love and pity for his sinful fellow-men. The Apostle was right in saying a little wine is good for the stomach's sake."

"Now, what is the business you wish to speak of?"

"It is of the boy, of course."

"Have you found him? The last time I was here, you felt sure you had a positive clew to his whereabouts—you said some of your men had traced him to Santa Fe. How did that turn out?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"It was time wasted," he confessed. "I regret to say it, my dear sir, but it was time and money wasted."

Adam Jayne smote the table with his clinched hand.

"That is what I thought," he almost snarled, his face being absolutely repulsive for the time. "You have been making a fool of yourself and me too, Slink! You have been wasting the money I have given you! I am done dealing with you, sir! Do you hear? I am done dealing with you!"

Still Slink smiled, and still he rubbed his bony hands together.

"You are getting excited, parson," came smoothly from his tongue. "There is no reason for it, I am—"

"Reason!" snapped Adam, turning out another glass and dashing it off—"reason! Will you talk to me of reason? Oh, you make me tired, Slink! I have played bank for you long enough; now I am done!"

"My dear sir," purred Elias, not in the least ruffled, "I am sure you will change your mind when you hear what I have to tell you. You are drinking too much, parson, and the liquor is going to your head."

Jayne was on the point of turning out another glassful, but he relinquished his purpose and settled back into his chair, twisting his face into a mass of sour knots.

"If you have anything to tell me, Brother Slink," he said, with an attempt at dignity, "I trust you will make it known. I have no time to waste in the follies of this life. It was the immortal Longfellow who said 'life is real and life is earnest.' There is work—hic!—in the vast vineyard of the world for all to do."

"Well, this is not the place to preach a sermon, parson. This time I am going to tell you a thing I am positive of: We are on track of the boy at last."

"Same old thing—same story!"

"But there is no mistake this time. The very man who saved him from the trap your money set, boldly appeared in Coffin City to-day."

"What?"

"It is the truth," smoothly smiled the crafty lawyer. "Violet Vane was in this town to-day!"

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND SON.

THE "Rev." Adam started to his feet as if in alarm, but immediately sunk back into the chair, reaching nervously for the bottle and turning out another brimming glass, his hand shaking so he spilled some while doing this.

Rolling the cigar far down into the left corner of his mouth and half-closing his small, foxy eyes, Lawyer Slink closely watched the effect of his words upon his client, the smile changing to something like a look of contempt as he noted the man's emotion.

Jayne tossed off the liquor at a gulp, not even waiting for his companion to accompany him with the usual teaspoonful he drank at one time.

Setting down the glass, his hand shaking as he did so, he muttered:

"The devil!"

"Eh?" came quickly from the lawyer's lips. "That is an unusual expression for you, my dear friend."

"I was simply finishing aloud a sentence I began in my mind," Adam explained. "What I said in full wash—hic!—that I had rather see most any one than this Violet Vane, even the Evil One. Shee?"

The effect of the liquor was becoming very noticeable upon the reverend gentleman. His face was flushed, and his words somewhat thickly spoken. Slink rubbed his hands with satisfaction and chuckled softly.

"Now, my dear sir, that is the last thing I would expect to hear from your lips," declared the oily lawyer, giving the cigar another roll from left to right in his mouth. "With a single exception, I had rather see this Violet Vane just now than any other person I know of."

"Who is the exception?"

"The boy."

"Well, why are you so delighted to see this Violet Vane?"

"Easily explained, dear sir, easily explained. It is quite certain Violet Vane aided the boy in escaping from us. We have spoken of that before. The kid could not have avoided us alone and got away without leaving a trace behind. You have said as much yourself before now, sir."

"Believe I have, Brother Slink. Go on."

"Well, if this man in velvet aided the boy to escape, it is quite probable he knows where the kid is at the present time. Isn't that so?"

"Jesht like's not."

"By watching Vane, we may find the boy. Savvy?"

Adam leaned forward on the table and extended his hand, which was promptly accepted by his crafty tool.

"Brother Slink, you're—hic!—a shewell!" asserted the reverend rascal. "You would be an ornament and a pillar of the church! You should come into the fold before it is everlastingly too late, and spend the rest of your days in working in the service of the Lord. In your—hic!—present occupation you are chastising your pearls before swine. Brother Slink, I feel for you—I do, and in the quiet sanctity of the closet you shall have my prayers. Yesh, you shall, my dear brother in shin, yesh you shall!"

"Many thanks, dear sir," purred Slink, once more settling back in the chair and apparently allowing the cigar to roll of its own accord across his mouth. "But business is business, and we are talking business just now, not religion. There will be lots of time for the latter after we are through with this little job—and I fancy we will have need enough of it. We shall be fortunate if we can secure enough of the simon-pure article to save us from an eternal roast."

Jayne shrugged his shoulders.

"You talk strangely, Brother Slink—strangely, strangely! Scarce can I understand the meaning of the words you utter. I surely am only doing my schober duty—hic!—trying to find the schildren of my dead brother Saul."

"How much money did your dead brother Saul leave them?"

Adam straightened up as stiff as a ramrod.

"Money, shir!" he said, with dignity. "My brother was comparatively a poor man. But what are these things to you? This is none of the business for which I engaged you, shir."

"Certainly not, certainly not," Slink hastened to say, as he rubbed his hands together, nervously. "Of course I understand there is some powerful incitive that leads you to relentlessly search for this boy."

"Affection, shir, affection! This heart—" placing his left hand in the vicinity of his right lung—"this heart beats with love for all the hum—the humble creatures of earth. That being the cashe, Brother Slink, why should it not beat with redoubled affection for those of my own kin! I would gather the poor homeless ones under the shadow of—hic—my wing. Shee?"

"Oh, cert. It is very plain—as plain and clear as mud. I hope and trust your love for this boy will not be thwarted. By the way, what became of the girl?"

Adam started nervously and glanced about, as if fearful of eavesdroppers, then he deliberately winked at his foxy tool, as he replied:

"She is shafe, I 'shure you, Brother Slink—I have taken the tenderest care of the little darling."

What a villainous, horrible smile crept snake-like across the face of the old hypocrite! Even

Slink, the crafty, was stirred by a momentary feeling of repulsion for the man whose money had lifted him from the gutter.

After a few moments, Adam broke into a cackling laugh, tipped his silk hat back on his head and called for a cigar.

"I believe I will schmoke, Brother Shlink," he said.

The lawyer hastened to set out a box of cigars.

"I should have offered them before, but you have always declined previously, saying you did not use the weed," he apologized.

"Tha's all ri'," assured Adam, selecting one and thrusting the wrong end into his mouth, while he vainly tried to light the wrong end of a match. "Useter schmoke, Shlinky, useter schmoke when I—hic—wash one of the boysh, y'know. I tell you, Shlinky, I wash a good one—hic! Cunfound thish ma'ch!"

"Try the other end, sir."

"No, I won't try t'other end! Gimme 'nother ma'ch."

After considerable trouble, Adam succeeded in lighting the cigar, having changed ends finally.

"Well, now we will go on wish our bushiness," he said. "Jesht lemme know what you propose to do anyhow, Brother Shlink."

"I propose to watch Violet Vane."

"Tha's all ri'."

"To do this, I must put two new men on his track."

"Yesh."

"It will cost money."

"Cer-hic!—cert!"

"I shall need some more."

"'Bout how much you want?"

Slink hesitated, being afraid to ask for too large a sum. He had succeeded in getting Jayne into the very condition he desired, but, from past experience, he knew there was such a thing as overstepping the limit.

"Hain't got mush ready monish," declared Adam. "Got ter go—hic!—light, Brother Slink."

The lawyer seized a pencil and paper and pretended to figure rapidly for a few moments. Finally, he paused with his head canted on one side and his half-smoked cigar pointing ceilingward from the upper corner of his mouth.

"How much?" impatiently demanded Jayne.

"Well," replied the lawyer, slowly, "I need five hundred, but I may be able to squeeze along for a couple of weeks on four but four is the very lowest figure."

Adam drew forth his pocketbook and counted out the sum of four hundred dollars.

"There you hash it," pushing the bills toward Slink's itching fingers. "And tha's the lasht you'll get 'lesht it 'mounts to something."

"I shall surely make it amount to something," declared the wily lawyer.

A few moments later, Adam Jayne left the office. When he was gone, Slink executed something like a war-dance in the middle of the room, restraining his desire to whoop with delight.

"Struck him again!" he snickered, triumphantly waving the money over his head. "Had to fill the old dog to do it, but I hit him just the same. I will be able to wear a silk hat soon! Ha, ha, ha! what a pie! I have bled the old rascal in great shape, and if I can play the cards right, I will continue to bleed him. I am in no great hurry about finding the boy, for I know a good snap when I strike it, and I never had such another one. When he refuses to pod over any more, then I will hustle to find the kid and get that reward. Oh, he, he, he!" He danced around the floor once more, and kicked the broken-backed chair across the room, where it struck the wall and fell in a splintered wreck.

"Soft, soft!" he muttered. "Chain up, Elias! You have ruined a chair and you cannot afford to buy another elegant easy to take its place. You don't want to lay out more money than is necessary in this God-forsaken hole. When this bit of business blows over, Elias Slink, attorney-at-law, will fold up his wigwag, like the noble red-man, and silently sneak away. Coffin City will know him no more forever. Yea, verily; so mote it be!"

With his silk hat tipped far back on his head, his hands thrust into his pockets, and the cigar pointing upward from one corner of his mouth, Adam Jayne made his way unsteadily down the street. He had taken a final drink before leaving Slink's office, and the result was that everything around him seemed decidedly shaky. "Blesh my eyesh!" he gurgled, speaking softly to himself. "I never notished b'fore that thish schtrete wash—hic!—sho confounded crooked. Crookedesth schtrete I ever shaw, tha's fac!"

The citizens of the place who happened to see him paused and stared at the singular sight, for never before had the "Rev." Adam appeared on the street in that deplorable condition.

"Full aser b'iled owl!" gurgled "Judge" Benjamin Hogg. "Parson's bin hittin' ther bottle, I reckon."

Hogg was the corpulent and greasy Judge Lynch of the torchlight tribunal, the intended result of which had been defeated by Violet Vane.

"It w'u'd do him good ef some one'd hit him with er good heavy club an' knock him senseless!" snorted Old Daddy Duzenberry, a recent comer in Coffin City.

Hogg instantly turned on the tall, lank old man.

"Do ye know thet gent?" demanded the "judge."

"Mebbe so; mebbe not. Who is he?"

"Thet is ther Reverend Adam Jayne."

"Ye don't say! Waal, waal! I tuck him fer Adam fool," and the old man chuckled at his own pun.

Jayne continued his way along the street till he came to a small cabin not far from the outskirts. Turning up to this, he pushed it open and entered, thickly humming;

"We won't go home till morning,
We won't go home till morning,
We won't go home till morning,
Till daylight doesh appear."

"Well, I sthwear!"

The exclamation came from an individual who was swinging in a hammock suspended within the room Adam had entered. And that individual was a youth of about nineteen, dressed in a decidedly "loud" suit of clothes. He was a decidedly insipid-looking young man, the downy mustache he was trying to raise on his upper lip adding none to his manliness.

As Adam entered, he started up in the hammock and adjusted an eyeglass to survey Elias Slink's client.

"Hullo, Jonash," greeted Jayne. "Sho you are taking things comfortable, my—hic—boysh! Well, tha's ri'—tha's all ri'."

"Well, I sthwear!" repeated Jonas, drawlingly.

Adam steadied himself with his feet wide apart, pulling vainly at a cigar, which had gone out while he was singing.

"Don't schwear, my son," he admonished, with great gravity. "Don't schwear, for it ish wicked. You know, Jonash, I have alwaysh been very careful to—hic!—bring you up in the way you schould go. I have tried to inculcate in your youthful mind the—hic!—prinschipsalsh of virtue and morality. I have felt a heavy 'sponsibility reshting on my shouldersh. I have prayed for you in public an' in the closet. I have—"

"You have been making a weglar fool of yourthelf, old man," drawled the respectful son, as he sunk back in the hammock and lighted a cigarette. "Why, you're half-shot!"

Adam looked shocked.

"Why will you—hic!—continue to ushe schlang?" he demanded, with attempted severity. "I hash done my besht to instruct you in the folly of the pernacious habit, but all my efforts sheem to be wasted—hic! Oh, Jonash, Jonash! I hash spent many weary nights praying for you, my shon!"

"Thay," lisped Jonas, "come off your pearch, paw! You make me tired!"

Adam began to snuffle and sob, at the same time fishing in his pocket for a handkerchief and dropping his cigar as he did so.

"This ish more than I can schtand!" he blubbered. "Oh, my shon, my shon! that I should ever come to thish!"

"Well, I thould think you would feel athamed," asserted the youth, languidly breathing the smoke of the cigarette through his nostrils. "I am athamed of you. You talk to me about dwinking, and here you are dwunk!"

Adam suddenly braced up and glared at the boy.

"Who 'sh drunk?" he demanded.

"You are, paw; dwunk ath an owl!"

"Jonash!"

"It ith a fact, old man."

"Jonash,—hic!—I am astonished!"

"Tho am I."

"To think you should shay such a thing of your father!"

"Stwait goods, paw."

Once more Adam began to snuffle as he swayed to and fro.

"Don't you think you had better lay down and cool off, paw?" drawled the youth in the hammock.

To this Adam growled a negative rely.

"You'll be off your pinth in a thort time, guv."

"I hash only—hic!—been taking shumshin for my throat," mumbled the elder Jayne. "Jesht one littlesh schwaller."

"It mutht have been awful pwowerful."

"I think it wash drugged," gurgled Adam.

"I thuppothe you would like the hammock, paw?"

"Well,—hem!—I might find it comfortable—hic!—for a schort time, Jonash."

The youth arose with evident reluctance.

"Allow me to athitht you, guv."

"Get out!" exclaimed the elder. "I' sh all ri'."

He staggered toward the hammock, but made a miscalculation and fell headlong over it, striking on his head and literally driving his silk hat over his ears. With a groan, he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Jonas laughed, heartlessly.

"Weg'lar jag the old man hath got on," he observed, as he bent over his fallen parent. "Hi, guv! rout up!"

But Adam made no attempt to rise.

"Knocked clean out!" chuckled the youth, as he dragged the silk hat from his father's head and held it up for inspection.

"Thereth a ten-dollar thilk hat gone to the deuth," he added. "I weckon the old gent won't be able to thay much to me after thith."

He tried to lift his parent into the hammock, but found the task too great for his puny strength, so he dragged the now snoring man into a corner and left him there.

"He'll never know the differenth till he waketh up," grinned Jonas, returning to the hammock.

CHAPTER IV.

SLINK FINDS AN ALLY.

ELIAS SLING was still dancing and chuckling when his office door was softly opened and a man slid silently into the room. Indeed, he entered so silently that he was well within the room before the lawyer was aware of his presence.

"Buenos dias, senor."

At this greeting Slink stopped his dancing with a suddenness somewhat ridiculous, and immediately began to bow, smile and rub his hands together.

"Ah, sir! good day, sir. Did you speak to me, sir?"

"Si, senoc."

The new-comer was apparently a Mexican, judging from his fanciful dress and dark face, to say nothing of the fact that he had thus far spoken in Spanish.

"What can I do for you, sir?" inquired Lawyer Slink.

The man glanced around the room, as if to make sure no other persons were present, then replied:

"I came to make some inquiries, senor."

"Anything I can do for you I will willingly do—at regular rates," smiled Elias. "Have a chair, sir, have a chair. By accident I fell over my other one and slightly damaged it," indicating the wreck of the one he had kicked against the wall. "In doing so, I hurt a pet corn, and I was dancing with the pain when you entered, sir."

The Mexican smiled and accepted the proffered chair, as the lawyer seated himself on the flat-topped table.

"Smoke!" and Elias offered the cigars.

The visitor shook his head.

"Not those, senor," was the reply. "Begging your pardon for declining, I will smoke a cigarette, if you do not object."

"Oh, certainly not, certainly not!" assured the lawyer, selecting a fresh cigar for himself. "Every man to his own taste. One's meat, another's poison."

The Mexican swiftly rolled a cigarette and lighted it.

"Now, senor, we will speak of business."

The lawyer, having lighted his cigar, rolled it into the left corner of his mouth, replying:

"O. K. Drive ahead, sir."

"First, I will say my name is Juan Pacheco, and I have come to these parts for the purpose of revenge. As you probably know, my people seldom forget an injury. When we have been wronged, there is nothing we desire so much as revenge."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

"I saw a man leave this office a few moments ago—"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Elias, nearly dropping his cigar in his surprise. "You don't mean

to say you are looking for revenge on Adam Jayne for some injury he has done you?"

Juan Pacheco shook his head.

"I am afraid I have come at this matter in an awkward fashion," he said, speaking surprisingly pure English. "It is not that man on whom I seek revenge, but if I have been informed rightly, that man is connected with the case. I have been told he is searching for a boy—a relative of his. Was that correct?"

"Possibly so, possibly so," and the lawyer slowly rubbed his hands together, while he studied the face of his visitor as if seeking to discover just what the man was coming at.

Juan smiled.

"I understand your suspicions," he declared; "and I see in what an awkward manner I have aroused them. But I tell you the truth, señor, when I say the man who recently left this office is not the man on whom I seek revenge. The one I am after is an enemy of his. Perhaps you know of him?"

"I can tell, if you will kindly mention the individual's name, dear sir."

"He is known as Violet Vane."

To say Elias was startled and surprised would be expressing it mildly; but he concealed his emotion to a great extent, simply rolling the cigar into the other corner of his mouth and blowing out a vast cloud of smoke at the same time.

"It seems to me as if I have heard of the fellow," he finally admitted.

"A dangerous man he is," asserted the Mexican.

"Would you object telling me your grievance against him?" smoothly inquired Slink.

Juan hesitated a moment, closely scanning the lawyer's face before he spoke.

"I think I can trust you," he finally said. "I shall not tell you anything you can use against me, though I hardly think you would take such an advantage."

"Most assuredly not, most assuredly not!" Elias hastened to say, smoothly rubbing his bony hands together. "You can trust me fully, freely."

"Let it be enough to say I belonged to a band of men of whom the leader was a beautiful American lady. What the men were or why they were organized it makes little difference. We all respected and admired our leader, for she was as daring as fair. But she was stern. None of us dared make love to her, though many were eager to do so. Among others, I worshiped her secretly; I would have given up my life for her. And she—she loved this man known as Violet Vane!"

The final words were uttered in a tone that nearly lifted the lawyer from the table and so startled him that he dropped his cigar, caught it as it fell and clapped the lighted end into his mouth.

With a yell of pain, astonishment and disgust, Elias leaped into the air, ejecting the cigar fairly into the face of the amazed Mexican. The moment his feet struck the floor, the lawyer started on a run around the room, thrusting his burned tongue out into the cool air, and crying:

"Wow! Google-oogle-cogle-oo!"

It was evident he was swearing in an unrestrained manner, but as he kept his tongue thrust out, his words all sounded the same and might have been a choice phrase from the Hot-tentot language for all his auditor could tell.

Catching up the bottle of liquor, the unlucky man took several big swallows, but the fiery stuff nearly strangled him and he fell to coughing in an alarming manner, rubbing his throat with his hands, while his eyes bulged out like huge buttons.

"*Madre de Dios!*" gasped the Mexican. "The man is mad!—he is having a fit! I will call assistance!"

He started for the door, but the lawyer caught him before he could get it open.

"Hold on—all right!" he spluttered. "Burned tongue on dad-blanked cigar!"

He soon succeeded in making Juan understand, and led the Mexican back to his seat, victoriously stamping on the cigar, which lay on the floor where it had fallen. When he was quite sure the lawyer was not deranged, Juan continued:

"As I said, the woman I loved, loved this velvet American. That was enough to make me hate him! But he cared nothing for her, and that made me hate him a thousand times more fiercely. In truth, he scorned her, and she was fair as the flowers! Still, when she knew he cared nothing for her, she continued to love him. I will not tell you all the wretched story, señor; let it be enough to say he was the direct

cause of her death—the cause of the death of the one I loved! I still love her in Heaven, for one so beautiful must go there! I swore to have revenge on him, but simply his death will not satisfy me. I have been where I could slay him several times, but I held my hand, waiting for a greater revenge. It will come! it will come!"

"But how does this concern me?" inquired Slink, slowly rubbing his hands together and half-closing his eyes. "I am sure I hardly understand why you have come to me with this story, sir."

"That is not difficult to explain. I have been tracking this velvet American, and I have seen him with a boy. I heard that the one who left this office a short time ago is looking for a boy supposed to be in the hands of Violet Vane. I came to you to learn if this is true."

"If it is, can you tell us where the boy is now?"

The Mexican shook his head.

"I did know till a short time ago. Till then, the boy and the American were living in an old hut far up among the mountains."

"Till how long ago?"

"About a week. Then I think they discovered I was watching the hut. In one night they disappeared. I have followed the American here; I know not where the boy is."

"But you think you could find him?"

"I do, if it would injure Violet Vane."

"Well, it will, sir, it will! You will be striking a direct blow for vengeance, and be aiding us at the same time. If you find out where the boy is, come directly to me, and be sure you tell no one else. I will pay you one hundred dollars if you are able to give me information that will lead to the securing of the boy. Is it a bargain?"

"Si, señor."

Their hands met.

CHAPTER V.

DADDY DUZENBERRY'S "GAL."

As has already been stated, the lank, angular old fellow known as Daddy Duzenberry, was a recent comer in Coffin City. He was a queer genius who seemed to care for nobody, and he had an odd, comical way of saying the most commonplace things. He would give a ludicrous twist to expressions, which would not have raised a smile had they been uttered by any one else. His wit was of that nameless character which it is impossible to express in cold type, and his homely face and figure seemed to redouble the humor of everything he said. In appearance he was more of a Down-East Yankee than a Westerner.

Daddy Duzenberry did not come alone to Coffin City. With him came a girl, of whom he always spoke of as "my gal." She had blue eyes and short curly hair, being really pretty, despite the questionable style of her garments. She seemed a bit shy and awkward, but there was a merry twinkle in her blue eyes that told of a hidden fountain of fun.

"Good gal 's ever breathed, Liz is," asserted the old man, proudly. "She hain't no cuckoo, but she allus stan's by ther ole man. Some fellers may think she's old enough to hev a beau. Wal, ef I ketch any of 'em snoopin' roun' whar she is an' playin' soft, I'll leave the impression of my han' on ther part of his breeches thet gits ther most wear an' tear w'en he's settin' down."

The accommodations in Coffin City were of a decidedly limited nature, and after examining the cabin built by Old Luckless, which stood about a mile down the creek, Daddy made inquiries concerning it. He was told the place was haunted by the spirit of the original owner, who had been murdered there.

"Git eout!" grinned the old man. "Sperrits! Fush! I hev never seen no sperrits thet I keered fer, egcept liquid sperrits, an' I guess mebbe I do care more fer them than I'd oughter. W'at I want ter know is: Who owns thet shanty?"

On being told that there was no living person who had a claim upon it, Daddy straightway announced his intention of moving into the hut.

"Haow about thet placher thar in ther crick?" he inquired.

"Waal," said Sweet Jim, one of the tough characters of Coffin City, "ef you begin ter work thet an' sticks ter it, you'll do better'n I think. One feller tried it sence Old Luckless wuz wiped out, but he said he c'u'dn't earn his salt."

"Wal, I'll try it," nodded Daddy. "Thar's suthin' in ther Bible about try never bein' beat. I hain't wealthy, an' I hev got ter do suthin' ter git chuck fer me an' Liz."

So he moved into the cabin and set up house-keeping with the utensils left by the former

owner of the place, which, strange to say, had not been stolen.

It was shortly after this that Jonas Jayne joined his father in Coffin City, the elder Jayne having come to the place alone originally.

Although Jonas was an insipid fellow, he prided himself on being something of a ladies' man, and, having heard of Lizzie Duzenberry, he exerted himself enough to walk down to the cabin beside the creek, hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl whom all Coffin City pronounced "a stunner."

Jonas was even more successful than he had dared hope, for, as he was sauntering slowly along, swinging his cane and smoking a cigarette, he suddenly came face to face with Daddy Duzenberry's "gal." Liz started back with a cry of alarm, and seemed on the point of running away, but, as he lifted his hat and bowed very low, the dude hastened to say:

"I beg your pawdon, I weally do! I twusth you will not be alawmed, fair damthel. I would not hawm you for the world, I athure you."

Liz looked puzzled and amused. It was possible she had never before met a creature of exactly that sort, and she inspected it with curiosity. Jonas was flattered by the thought that he had made an instant impression, and he bowed again, more effusively than at first, pressing one hand on his bosom over his heart.

"Thith ith a gweat pleathure," he declared. "I thcartbly dweamed of meeting a young lady of thuch pwepothething appearance in thith wild thbction of the countwy—I weally didn't."

Liz turned away to hide a smile.

"Allow me to intwoduthe mythelf," continued Jonas, feeling for a card. "Good gwathuth! I have forgotten my cawds!"

He seemed really distressed.

"Never mind the keerds, mister," said Liz. "Daddy don't 'low me to play keerds."

"Baw Jove!"

Then Jonas removed his cigarette from his mouth, but the vacuum was instantly filled by the head of his cane, and, standing thus, he stared at Liz with increasing admiration.

"Dcothed pritty girl!" he muttered, removing the cane. "Dethididly chawming! Thith ith equal to the fwind of a gold mine! Blue eyes, weal yellow hair, wed lips! Oh, yum!"

Jonas was allowing his emotions to quite carry him away.

"What did ye say, sir?" asked Liz, who had not caught all of the young man's words. "Was ye speakin' of me?"

"I wath. I don't dare wepeat it for fear you might—aw—be offended."

At this Liz fired up.

"So you was makin' sport of me, was ye?" she cried, advancing toward him, with her hands tightly clinched and her eyes flashing. "Now, if there is any one thing I won't stan' it's thet, mister. You've got ter take it back!"

As she advanced, Jonas retreated in amazement, gasping:

"My gwathuth! She is a weg'lar thpit-fire! I wath not thaying anything of the kind, I athure you, Mith—Mith— Ugh!"

The final exclamation came from his lips as one of his feet struck against a stone and he sat down on the ground with more force than grace, nearly biting his tongue in two as he did so.

"Ow-wow!" he moaned, dropping his cane and cigarette and pressing his hands to the sides of his face. "I believe I am killed—I do, baw Jove!"

Liz stopped and pressed her hands to her sides, being convulsed with laughter at sight of the discomfiture of the would-be masher.

"Ha, ha, ha!" she laughed, the sound ringing out like merry music. "If you will come here, I'll help ye up, mister."

"Tain't anything to lawf at!" was Jonas's indignant assertion. "Harged if I can thee anything funny about it!"

"It is all in ther way ye look at a thing, mister. If you was me an' I was you, I guess you'd jest come nigh to splittin'. I'm glad you happened along, fer I hain't hed so much fun in a week, and I was gittin' kind of lonesome."

Jonas struggled to his feet, looking very red in the face.

"I weckon the joke ith on me thith time," he finally confessed, brushing the dirt from his pantaloons. "I don't know ath I weally blame you for la' fing, but you are thuch a chawming girl, ye know, it did cut me up dweadful. I athure you I wath not thaying anything uncomplimentary to you, dear mith. In fact—" edging closer to her and giving her a heart-breaking look—"you are thuch a beautiful girl that I am quithe smitten by your chawms. Your eyeth are of the heavenly blue; your lipth—"

"Hello, hello, heur!" exclaimed the voice of Daddy Duzenberry, as the old man suddenly appeared on the scene and clutched Jonas by the collar. "What does this mean? What are you sayin' to my gal? I've gi'n due notiss I w'u'dn't hev no fellers snoopin' roun' heur an' thet I'd spank 'em ef I ketch'd 'em. Young man, you'll hev ter take yer bitters."

The next moment Jonas was bent over the old fellow's knee and Daddy's hand was doing its duty. Jonas squawked and kicked like a school-boy, but the old man continued deliberately about his purpose till he was satisfied with the extent of the punishment. Then he picked up the dude's hat and cane, placed them in his hands and started him toward Coffin City.

"Arter this I guess you'll steer cl'ar of my gal," chuckled Daddy, as he watched Jonas's retreating form. "One doset oughter be enough."

At a safe distance, the discomfited masher turned and shook his clinched fist at the one who had heaped such an indignity upon him.

"Oh, how could you, Daddy!" laughed Liz. "He was such jolly fun!"

CHAPTER VI. TWO TENDERFEET.

ONE day the stage brought two tenderfeet into Coffin City. One was a young man of about twenty-five, the other a boy of uncertain age, apparently not more than seventeen, and he looked younger than that.

These two seemed to be strangers, and although they occasionally exchanged glances as if desirous of making each other's acquaintance, neither ventured to address the other. Indeed, the boy was scarcely heard to utter a word to any of his fellow-passengers; but the young man conversed freely with several, making eager inquiries about Coffin City and its inhabitants.

"Poorty bad place fer tenderfeet, I've heern tell," suddenly observed one rough-looking fellow, who up to this point had seemed strangely moody and silent. "Man's got ter be able ter shoot at ther drop of ther hat thar. It's er good plan ter lay mighty quiet an' sing low in sech a place. I don't reckon they'll be arter straddlin' Red Lark, but you hed best keep yer eyes skinned, young man."

The speaker was attired in the mud-coated garments of a miner, and a mass of bushy red beard covered his face nearly to his eyes, from which he probably derived the name of Red Lark.

"Many thanks," smiled the older of the two tenderfeet. "I am aware I carry the stamp of the East upon my person, but I assure you I have knocked about in the West a bit of late, and I have learned the value of discretion."

At this the red-bearded miner only grunted, but several times the young man noticed he was staring wonderingly and in a puzzled manner at the boy. Once he slowly shook his head, as if there was something about the lad's appearance he could not understand.

Coffin City was finally reached, and of the passengers who stopped there were the two tenderfeet and Red Lark. The young man scowled a little as he saw the red-bearded fellow following him into the hotel, and the scowl deepened when he observed the miner was keeping his eyes on the boy.

Within the hotel, the boy approached the register, wrote his name, paid his bill for three days in advance, then asked to be shown to a room. His only piece of baggage was a small, closely-packed grip.

"Shown ter yer room?" gasped the long-haired clerk. "Wal, I sw'ar! W'at d'yer take this howtel fer? Hyer's yer tag hitched ter ther key ter yer room, an' ther number is on ther tag. You go up ther stairs an' find a number thet'll fit ther number thar, unlock ther door, walk right in an' make yerself ter home. Savvy?"

The boy nodded and started for the stairs. Then, as the second tenderfoot was signing his name, the clerk stared after the first, muttering contemptuously:

"Showed ter his room! Wonder what he takes this howtel fer? Showed—ter—his—room! Waugh!"

The name which the boy had written was "Timothy Stiles," and after it had added "Claremont, N. H."

The second tenderfoot signed as "Leon Forest, Lawrence, Mass." He did not ask to be shown to his room, but accepted a tagged key, and made for the stairs, not having uttered a word.

Red Lark leaned over the dirty register and slowly spelled out the names just written. He was so long about this that the clerk became im-

patient and asked him if he was going to stop there. At this the miner settled back and stared so hard at the pompous employee that the impatient individual was quite confused and muttered an apology about having business and being in a hurry. The man of the red beard made no reply, but accepted the pen and wrote the title by which he was known, scrawling the name in letters which would have put John Hancock to shame.

It was nearly an hour after this that Leon Forest appeared before the register, and, by offering the clerk a good cigar, which was promptly accepted, sought to draw the autocrat into conversation about Coffin City. Although the clerk looked upon tenderfeet with unutterable contempt, he finally thawed beneath the influence of the cigar and deigned to answer some of the young man's questions.

Forest's questions were asked in a rambling, off-hand manner, as if they came from the merest idle curiosity, but, in truth, there was a purpose behind it all.

"Yep, Coffin City's great place," assured the clerk, blowing out huge puffs of fragrant smoke. "Boun' ter boom. No rocket business, but it's climbin' all ther time, bet yer boots! Now, thar's Deadwater Bar, she went up on er night—literally whooped her up in no time. Ev'rybody went wild—people rushed—great boom. They 'lowed Deadwater war boun' ter rake ther rag off ther bush. Some of ther Coffin City galoots got ther fever an' scooted off, head up an' tail in ther air. But they kem back, you bet! Big boom—went bu'st. Thet's ther null of it. Hain't nuthin' thar now. Coffin City keeps crawlin', but she'll git thar with both feet."

This did not seem to greatly interest Forest, and he asked:

"I suppose you keep track of nearly everybody who comes to this place?"

"Wal, now, w'at makes ye s'pose thet?"

"I judged from your appearance that you are a man of excellent memory and keen observation."

"Wal, you didn't git thet very fur out of ther way."

"I thought not."

"You do know suthin', pard, ef you are a tenderfut."

Leon Forest laughed.

"Many thanks. I wonder if you remember the name of Wallace Kenyon?"

The clerk wrinkled his forehead and seemed in deep thought for several moments, but he finally shook his head.

"Don't seem ter 'member ary critter by thet handle," he confessed. "W'at fur lookin' galoot wuz he?"

"A boy—nothing but a mere boy."

"How long ergo wuz he hyer?"

"Well, I cannot say as to that. In fact, I am not positive he has been here at all. He was known to be in this part of the country, and I am trying to get trace of him."

"Twarn't more'n a y'ar ergo he wuz hyer, eh?"

"No. If he was here at all, it was some time within the past six months."

"Travelin' erlone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tenderfut?"

"Yes."

"Hain't bin no kid hyer thet'll answer thet description—cept it's thet one as kem same time you did on ther bearse ter-day. Kenyon warn't ther name he signed, but ye can't tell much by sech leetle things as thet."

Forest shook his head.

"Thet is not the boy."

"I 'low you hev seen this kid you are huntin' arter?"

"No."

"No? Wal, then you mus' be familiar with ther one as kem in ter-day?"

"Wrong again. He was simply a fellow-passenger."

"Then how in blazes do you know 'tain't ther one you are lookin' arter?"

Leon did not seem to like these questions of the clerk, so he attempted to turn the conversation into a different channel; but there was one point on which the autocrat was determined to express an opinion. Leaning on the little counter, he winked one eye knowingly, observing in a stage whisper:

"Say, pard, I 'low you are one of them thar detectives?"

Forest laughed and shook his head.

"You are 'way off," he declared. "I am not a detective."

The clerk looked disappointed and doubtful, seeming uncertain whether to believe the statement or not.

"That is straight," Leon assured. "I do not care to have the impression get out that I am a detective, for I am not."

"Wal, I don't usually make sech a wild shot. Ef you wuz one of them, I wus goin' ter tell ye ter keep it mighty shy, fer thet kind hain't loved in Coffin City. Ye see, thar are lots of galoots hyer thet hev lighted outer other places fer certun reasons an' it makes 'em mighty narvous fer er detective critter ter come nosin' roun'."

"I understand. They need not have any alarm on my account. My only business is to look out for this boy known as Wallace Kenyon."

"By smoke!"

"What is it?"

"I've just thunk! I'll bet thet wuz ther very kid!"

"Who? What?"

"Thar wuz er boy hyer 'bout two months ergo but he didn't hang roun' town much. He stopped down ther crick with an ole cuss they called Ole Luckless."

Leon instantly became highly interested.

"Now we are getting at something!" he exclaimed. "What about the boy—what can you tell me? Where is he now?"

"Gone ter Glory, I reckon, pard."

"What! What do you mean by that?"

"Ef he wuz any relation of yourn, you'll hev ter putt on mournin'."

"How is that?"

"Ole Luckless wuz killed—murdered; boy wuz caught, then some of ther fellers went down thar an' Jedge Lynch held a court."

"Great God! You don't mean to say the boy was hanged for murder?"

"Wal, pard, he hain't bin seen roun' this yere town sence then."

Leon seemed dazed.

"Is the search to end this way?" he muttered.

"Great heavens! Are you sure the lad was hanged?"

"Nop. Jedge Lynch don't usually tell tales. All I kin say is thet he hain't showed up in Coffin City sence ther night arter Ole Luckless wuz murdered. Thar are several galoots in this place as c'u'd tell ye more of it then I kin, but I reckon you'll find them dumb as clams."

"Wallace Kenyon never committed a murder."

"How do you know, pard? You say that you never saw the kid."

"It makes no difference how I know; I know! If he was lynched, that was murder, and it shall not go unavenged!"

"Hush up thet kind of talk, you fool!" exclaimed the clerk, looking hastily around to see if any one had overheard the hot-headed young man's words. "Ef you feel thet way, you don't want to yoop her out in thet style, ur you'll wake up some mornin' an' find yerself dead. It's mighty dangerous ter talk on a high key in Coffin City. Sing low an' wait fer yer chance. I tell you this, young feller, because I hev kinder taken a likin' ter ye, though I can't say jest why I sh'u'd."

"Many thanks. I will not forget your kind intentions. Have another cigar?"

The clerk accepted the cigar, and Leon walked slowly away, turning to ascend the stairs. When he was gone, another stranger in Coffin City came forward and examined the register, asking the name of the young man who had been talking with the clerk.

Five minutes later, this person was rapping at the door of room Number 9. Leon Forest's voice asked who was there, and the one who had rapped replied:

"I am Violet Vane, and I have come to tell you something of Wallace Kenyon."

CHAPTER VII.

VANE GIVES LEON SOME POINTS.

INSTANTLY the door was opened, and into the room walked the Velvet Sport, Violet Vane. In every way a dandy, yet in no way effeminate, he was truly a handsome man, although upon his face rested a faint look of sadness, which might have been caused by some past sorrow.

"I trust you will pardon this uncereemonious call," said the man in velvet. "I happened to overhear some of your conversation with the clerk, and so I made bold to come up, thinking I might possibly be able to tell you something of interest concerning the boy for whom you are searching."

Leon closed the door.

"If you can tell me anything of Wallace Kenyon, you shall have my heartiest thanks for your trouble," he asserted, placing a chair for his visitor.

Vane accepted the chair, removing his dark sombrero and placing it on the table, thus revealing a finely-shaped head, thatched by a mass of dark, curling hair.

"Well, it happens I know something of the lad," said the Velvet Sport. "But, unfortunately, I know nothing of you, sir."

Leon flushed and looked surprised.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, a trifle haughtily.

"Just what I said," was the cool reply; "no more, no less. I know nothing of your purpose in searching for Wallace Kenyon. You seem to have the face of an honest man, I will admit that, but one cannot always judge by appearances. I hope you will not take offense at my plain words. I speak exactly what I mean, and that is much better than to beat around the bush. Although it may seem rather blunt at first, it is the best way of coming to an understanding."

Leon laughed, shortly.

"You say you know nothing of me and my purpose in searching for Wallace Kenyon; in return, I can say I know nothing of you and your purpose in coming to this room. That puts us on equal footing, and we are exactly where we were before we started."

"At that rate we will not get ahead very fast," confessed Vane. "It is plain I shall have to take some things at a venture. But I suppose there is no doubt about your being a friend to the boy?"

"Not the least. I am surely his friend."

"Yet I heard you tell the clerk you had never met him."

"You did."

"I scarcely understand how this friendship comes about."

"Then it is one of the things you will have to take by faith," half-laughed the tenderfoot. "I give you my word of honor, but I absolutely decline to explain."

Vane wrinkled his brows a little, but said:

"I suppose we shall have to make the best of the situation, so I will go ahead, believing you are the boy's friend. In return, I will say I am also his friend. All the same, he has enemies, and bitter enemies they are."

"You say he has enemies. Then is Wallace Kenyon still living?"

"He is."

"This is good news, indeed! The clerk gave me the impression he had been lynched."

"It is no fault of his enemies he was not."

"He escaped—?"

"With assistance."

"And he truly was accused of murder?"

"Yes."

"It was a put-up job?"

"You have struck the truth. His enemies sought to put him out of the way."

"And this old miner with whom the boy was living—what of him?"

"Now you have asked me a hard one. He was said to have been murdered, and two men swore they saw and examined his dead body, yet that body had vanished at the time of the trial and was not to be found. To be sure, the men who took that oath are two of the worst rascals who ever breathed. There were blood-stains on the floor of the cabin, and these, with the evidence of the two rascally witnesses and the purchased verdict of the villainous judge, were sufficient to convict the unfortunate lad."

"But you think—"

"I do not know what to think about Old Luckless. The man may have been in the game against the boy, but from what I have been able to learn, he was a rather kind-hearted, shiftless old fellow who was never known to harm any one. He took the boy in and gave him a home when there was no other place for the unfortunate lad to go. It hardly seems as if he was a man to go into a plot against Wallace Kenyon's life, and yet—"

"What?"

"Money will tempt the best of the human race, and Old Luckless was far from being of the best."

"If he was in the plot—"

"If he was in the plot, it is probable he was induced to get out of these parts and leave the boy behind. Then the blood-stains were arranged, the evidence of the two ruffians was laid out, the boy was frightened into an attempt to leave this vicinity, but captured while he was getting away. That was enough. The trial was short, and he was pronounced guilty."

"Yet, he escaped?"

"He did, with the assistance of a person who appeared upon the scene just as he was being dragged to his doom. This person held the crowd covered with cocked revolvers, while

Wallace got away on the back of his new friend's horse."

"And who was this friend?"

Vane smiled, slightly.

"It was *you*!" cried Leon, springing to his feet. "You saved Wallace Kenyon's life!"

"You are right."

Forest grasped Vane's hand and shook it warmly.

"You're a brick!" he exclaimed. "But where is the boy now?"

"He is safe."

"That is pleasant information, but it is not just the answer I desire."

"It will have to satisfy you."

"Why, how is that?"

"The boy prefers to keep in the background for the present."

"But he cannot wish to hide from his friends."

"Possibly not."

"And I am his friend."

"I have heard you say so, but you must remember I have had no proof save your word. Still, if I was certain, I could not tell you where he is till I obtained his consent, for I have pledged myself to keep his whereabouts a secret."

Leon looked disappointed.

"If he knew the truth, he would hasten here at once," he muttered.

"Possibly so," admitted Vane. "The best thing you can do is to tell me *the truth*, which I will repeat to the boy. That should bring about a meeting as soon as you desire."

But the young tenderfoot hesitated, a look of suspicion stealing across his face. What if this velvet dandy had been lying to him—what if Vane was an enemy working for a hidden purpose? Doubts and fears crowded thick upon him.

"It is not so much myself," he murmured, half-turning away; "but I must be careful. Were I— No, I will not take the risk."

The final words were uttered loud enough for Vane to hear. The Sport bowed, quietly.

"Do as you choose," he said. "If you prefer to hold back anything, you certainly have a right to do so. I cannot blame you for your caution. In fact, caution is commendable. That is one thing that keeps me from telling you what you desire. By keeping silent you will not harm me, for I am only an outsider in this game. Still, I rendered a verdict of not guilty for the boy, and I am going to stand by him till I prove my verdict correct. He will come out at the top of the heap, for all of his enemies."

"His enemies—who are they?"

"The principal one is as great a villain as ever disgraced the calling of a clergyman! He is a smooth-faced hypocrite who calls himself Adam Jayne."

As Vane uttered this name, he heard a sudden stir and a sound like a gasp coming from beyond a board partition which separated the room he was in from the one adjoining. He looked inquiringly at Forest, but the young man appeared not to have heard the sounds.

"So it is that whelp!" cried Leon. "Where is he now?"

"You speak as if you knew him."

"Perhaps I do. Anyway, I know enough of him!"

"You do not like him?"

Leon made a gesture of repugnance.

"He is one of the greatest rascals unhanged!"

"Well, we can agree on that point."

"Where is he?"

"He is here in Coffin City."

Once more Vane fancied he heard a rustle and a gasp in an adjoining room.

"And his son?" asked Leon.

"Is also here."

"He is a chip of the old block. Those two men should be behind iron bars—and by heavens! they shall go there yet!"

The young man was excitedly pacing the floor. Vane watched him closely, nodding with satisfaction, plainly pleased by the honest indignation and hatred so freely expressed by the tenderfoot.

"Well," and the Velvet Sport arose, "I do not see as I can tell you anything further of interest, so I will leave you."

Forest wheeled with outstretched hand.

"Accept my thanks for your favor," came earnestly from his lips. "I appreciate it, no matter how I may have appeared. When the time comes for you to understand my position, if it ever does, you will know why I could not meet you more openly. I am sure you are a friend to be cultivated."

Vane smiled in his winning way.

"The apologies should not be all on one side," he observed. "We have both held something in

reserve, but I gave the boy my word I would not betray him. Until I have his consent, I can tell you nothing further of him. Meantime, if you need a friend, Violet Vane may be around to take a stand at your side."

As he passed out into the corridor, the Velvet Sport glanced at the door of the room from which had come the strange sounds he had noticed. It bore the figure 8.

Descending the stairs, Vane once more approached and examined the register. He found room Number 8 was assigned to Timothy Stiles.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PRECIOUS PAIR.

THE "Rev." Adam Jayne awoke in a decidedly unpleasant mood. At first he seemed dazed, and when he started up to look around, his head swam and was pervaded by such pains that he sunk back, uttering a groan.

"Hello, paw!" drawled Jonas, entering the cabin at that moment. "Tho you are coming awound? Well, it ith about time, faw you sthlept the biggest pawt of the day, baw Jove!"

"Oh, my head, my head!" groaned Jayne the elder.

"Feelth good, don't it, paw!" and Jonas struck an attitude in the middle of the floor, his everlasting cigarette being held between his thin lips, as usual. "I have been there mythelf, old man, and I know all about it."

"My head will split!"

"Well, you came very near sthplitting it, guv. You fell ovah the hammawk and thpoiled your hat. Taking that with the jag you carried, I thould think your head would ache."

Adam sat up with his head against the wall and glared at his disrespectful son. He was a pitiful-looking object, and Jonas broke into a snickering laugh.

"You ought to have your picture taken now, paw—you had, baw Jove! You pwethent a werry impothing athpect! Oh, my gwathuth, guv! I nevah thaw you look tho widiculouth!"

"Jonas!" snarled the parent.

"Yeth, thir."

"Do you dare to talk to me in this manner? The Lord knows I have had trouble enough, and I have borne with you with the fortitude of a saint. But there is a limit even to the endurance of a Christian."

"Oh, you make me tired, paw!"

Adam fairly frothed with anger. Indeed, his rage was so great he could only splutter, failing to utter the wrathful words which surged to his lips.

"Don't sthwear, paw," entreated Jonas, with mock solicitude. "That wath what you thaid to me. Keep your temper, guv."

Finally the angry man managed to snarl:

"Bring me some water!"

With aggravating deliberation, his son obeyed the order, and Adam drank greedily.

"There, that makes me feel better," he asserted. "Help me up, Jonas, you ungrateful rascal!"

The son gave his parent a helping hand, and Adam struggled to his feet.

"I was drugged!" he growled, as he hung on the youth's shoulder, still feeling giddy. "I tell you I was drugged! Do you hear?"

"Yeth, thir."

"I wonder if I have been robbed."

Adam felt for his pocketbook and opened it. After an examination, he fairly shouted:

"I have—I have been robbed! I knew it! I was drugged and robbed!"

Jonas began to look alarmed.

"Why, your money ith there!" he said.

"Four hundred dollars are gone!" snarled the "Rev." Adam, the discovery dispelling his giddiness so he was able to execute a first-class imitation of an Indian war-dance. "Do you hear that, you worthless dog? *Four hundred dollars!* I have been robbed!"

"Why didn't the thief take the whole of it, paw?"

"Blanked if I know; but I do know a cleau four hundred are missing!"

"Where did you get the dwink?"

"At Slink's. Oh, that rascally lawyer! I believe he was the one who robbed me!"

"More likely you gave him the cawsh for thomething, paw. Jutht sthoph and think."

Adam did so, and finally succeeded in recalling the fact that he had given the lawyer the money in a business transaction.

"But the infernal scoundrel drugged the liquor, so as to get it out of me!" he protested. "I would not have given him more than half that sum if I had been sober. He has had too much money already."

"Well, I think he hath had enough," agreed Jonas.

Adam sunk into a chair, pressing his hands to his throbbing head.

"You are a pretty bird to let your poor old father lay on the floor!" he snapped, wishing to change the subject. "There I was curled up in that corner like a dog!"

"I twied to get you into the hammawk, paw, but you wath too heavy."

"Well, you are a weak, puny thing, anyway! Why can't you be a man, Jonas?"

"You made me what I am, guv."

"All you think of are cigarettes and pretty girls."

"Two doothed good things! By the way, paw, I have sthwuck a doothed fine-looking girl heah."

"Eh?" exclaimed Adam, instantly becoming interested. "Is that so? I don't believe I have seen her! Who is she?"

"Her name ithn't worry refined, but she ith a lulu. Her name ith Mith Duthenberry, and she hath got the meaneth old dad I ever thaw; but she ith a bwick, baw Jovel!"

"Duzenberry!" snorted Adam, in supreme disgust. "She must be the 'gal' I have heard that old long-legged vagabond telling about. Oh, yes, she must be a brick! I'll bet she is red-headed and freckle-faced!"

"That ith where you are w'ong, old boy. She ith a weg'lar daithy! But I had an encounter with the old cuth, and, baw Jovel! he vewy nearly got the betth of me, ye know!"

"How did you get away—run?"

"Wun—me wun! No, thir! I thook my cane in hith face and told him I would bwreak it ovah hith head if he touched me. That f'wightened him."

Adam looked incredulous, but Jonas insisted that he spoke the truth.

"I mutht have thome amuthement, if I am going to sthay in thith howible hole," declared the youth. "When are you going to get your handth on that couthin of mine?"

"Well, I can't say," confessed Adam. "Slink has promised so much, and made so many fail-ures, that I am not sure of anything. We are having a heap of trouble over this business."

"It would have been better if you had let me theen the girl and twied to marwy her."

"But we would have secured only half of the property in that manner. I did not let you see the girl because she was pretty, and I knew you would make a fool of yourself over her. She was so unfortunate as to fall overboard in the Missis-sippi."

Jonas winked, knowingly.

"Yeth, werry bad affair, baw Jovel! But ye know I heard you mutterwing in your sthleep one night, paw."

The elder Jayne turned pale, and uttered something that sounded suspiciously like an oath.

Jonas calmly continued:

"You mutht have made a anithtake when you puthed her overboard, paw. It wath—"

"Jonas!" thundered Adam, his face growing still whiter. "Be careful what you say, sir! Men mutter 'most anything in their dreams."

"They thometimeth mutter thingth they wish they hadn't," was the young dandy's insinuating retort. "It ithn't any uthe faw you to sthquirm, guv, I am onto you."

At this, Adam turned on another tack, hold-ing up his hands with a pretense of holy horror.

"Oh, Heavenly Father! my son, my son!" he moaned. "That you should think such wicked thoughts of your own father! I have tried to bring you up as a Christian parent should—the Lord knows I have—but I fear the crown of my efforts and prayers will be failure. I fear it! I fear it!"

"Oh, thay, old boy! hadn't you bettah let up on that kind of sthuff? I am getting too old to sthswallow it, ye know. I weckon you are a sthly old rat, paw."

The elder man drew down the corners of his mouth and knotted his face into a look of un-utterable sadness.

"In these degenerated days even one's own son suspects him," came solemnly from his lips, as he slowly shook his head. "Jonas, if you ever become as worthy a man as your father—"

"I sthall sthand a good chance of getting a hot corner down below. Oh, don't pweach any more to me, old man! I am tired and thick of tho much guff!"

And, lighting another cigarette, Jonas flung himself into the hammock, advising his father to put his head to soak in a bucket of water.

With another half-expressed oath, the older man followed the advice.

CHAPTER IX.

RED LARK IS PUZZLED.

THE Mexican, Juan Pacheco, was given the duty of trailing and shadowing Violet Vane. Slink suggested he have an assistant, offering to furnish one, but Juan protested he could do much better alone.

"If you give me an assistant, senor, I shall have to watch him as much as I do this velvet American, for the chances are the man will drink, and no one who drinks and allows liquor to dull his senses is a match for Violet Vane. The task will be much easier if you let me have it all to myself."

He easily brought the lawyer to the same opinion.

"But, my dear sir," cautioned Slink, "even if you have a good chance to get revenge on Violet Vane by knifing him in the back, you must not do so unless you are positive you can lay your hands on the boy. Make sure of the boy first, then you may do what you please with the Velvet Sport."

"Si, senor; I understand. I have not any care to kill this man too quickly. That would be too small revenge. Do you know Violet Vane, senor?"

"Know him?"

"Si, know his face."

"Well, I have never seen him but twice, dear sir. To be sure, I made no study of his features on those occasions, but one cannot easily mis-take his manner of dress."

"That is true, but he is very shrewd in the way of disguises. Do you think you would know him in disguise?"

The lawyer was obliged to confess he might not.

"Well, it matters little," fell from Juan's lips. "I would know the dog in any disguise! Ah-a! Car-r-ramba! He shall not escape my vengeance!"

The Mexican and Slink finally left the office together.

"I will hunt up the boys and put you on good footing with them. If I did not, you might work at cross-purposes, and we cannot afford any of that business. Time is money, dear sir, and time wasted is money thrown away."

So, in company, they sought out "Judge" Benjamin Hogg, finding him hanging over a bar, fat, greasy and half-intoxicated.

"Ah! I'm derved glad ter see yer, pard!" gurgled the "judge," extending a pudgy hand and grasping that of the Mexican. "So you're lookin' arter ther cuss called Vierlet Vane, am ye? Wal, all I've got ter say is thet he's er mighty bad man ur else they lie 'bout him. Hev heerd he is in town, but I saw ther galoot once't, an' I don't keer 'bout seein' him erg'in. Thet is, I don't keer 'bout it 'less he's tied han' an' fut an' is a pris'ner up fer trial afore me. W'u'd I like ter hev him thar? Wal, I sh'u'd cough up a clam! Ef I hed him thar, his chance of 'scapin' ther rope 'd be mighty slim, you bet!"

"You cannot tell me anything of the velvet American," declared Juan. "I do believe he is in league with *el diablo*! Bullet or steel do not seem to harm him. But Juan is relentless; he will not know rest till the dog lies dead at his feet. First, I would have him in my power—I would make him cringe and beg for his life—I would scorn him, spit on him! You know nothing of the fire in my heart."

His manner was so fierce and his eyes fixed on them so strangely that they involuntarily shrunk back before him.

"Holy smokel!" croaked Hogg. "I don't want to get you arter me, pard!"

Juan smiled, bitterly, his yellow hand caressing his dark mustache and imperial for a moment.

"It is the way of my people," he said. "We love with all our heart and soul; we hate as fiercely as we seem to love. A great passion consumes us."

At this moment Lank Ike and Sweet Jim entered the saloon together, their appearance being hailed by an exclamation of delight from Elias Slink.

"We were looking for you, gentlemen," declared the oily lawyer, rolling a half-smoked cigar across his mouth. "Fortune has made it unnecessary to look further."

Introductions followed, after which Juan invited them all to have a drink at his expense, something they were not loth to do.

"Hyer's luck ter ye in downin' Vierlet Vane," mumbled Hogg, as he lifted his brimming glass. Juan was evidently a light drinker, for he barely tasted of the liquor.

"If once I get started, there is no stopping

me," he said, in explanation. "I have to use caution about drinking. When my vengeance is complete, I will drink as long and as much as the best of you."

"I'll go ye on thet, ef you'll pay fer ther stuff," promptly declared the "judge." "An' ef I don't drink ye off yer feet, I'm er liar!"

"You will find the job no small one, senor."

A short time later, Juan left them.

Later in the day, the Mexican made his way down the creek to Daddy Duzenberry's cabin. Liz was sitting in the open doorway, and she was startled when Juan suddenly appeared before her.

"Buenos dias, senorita," and the fellow bowed low, sombrero in hand. "A beautiful picture you make. Are you alone?"

Liz looked somewhat alarmed.

"Daddy hain't so fur away but he kin hear me yoop," she answered. "You'd best git out, fer he don't like ter hev fellers roun' hyer. He's awfully ugly, is Daddy."

"Him I do not fear," was Juan's boastful declaration. "I have no fear of any American."

"Wal, now, you must be a reg'ler hero," came somewhat sarcastically from the girl's lips.

The Mexican drew himself up proudly.

"Juan has passed through many dangers," he asserted. "To him they are as nothing. He has no fear of one old man."

"I guess you never saw my dad."

"Si, senorita; I saw him in Coffin City to-day. They told me he had a daughter—one fair as the wild flower. I was interested, and her I came to see. I have found her."

"Oh, you talk like a poet, and you are nuth-in' but a Greaser!"

At this Juan scowled.

"There is Spanish blood in my veins," was his assertion.

"Is thet so?"

"It is true."

"I don't s'pose thet's liable ter cause any disturbance in Spain, is it?"

The man looked puzzled.

"I may not understand you," he confessed. "I think you may be laughing at me."

The girl's eyes twinkled.

"Oh, you're too s'picious! But say, don't you think you'd best git?"

"Why?"

"Daddy will hear voices and be comin' roun'," "Let him come."

"He don't like ter hev fellers come snoopin' roun' hyer. It's strictly 'g'inst his principles."

"Why does he not like it?"

"Oh, he says I hain't old enough ter hev a feller. I don't 'gree with him on that p'int."

"Nor do I, senorita. It is not right for him to hide such a rare flower. I would not endure it of him."

"Oh, I don't care about no fellers!" protested Liz.

"You have not the chance to see them, If you did—well, something might happen. *Quien sabe?*" (Who knows?)

At this the girl giggled and shrugged her shoulders.

"What kin you mean?" she asked.

"Why, you might get married."

"Oh, no, no! I hain't never goin' ter do thet. I'm jest alwus goin' ter live with Daddy an' look arter him."

The Mexican smiled, knowingly.

"Many of them do talk that way," he said; "but they do not mean it."

At this Liz fired up somewhat.

"Now, look hyer!" she cried, her eyes flashing; "do you mean to say I lie? I won't stan' thet, mister! If thet's w'at you mean, I'm goin' ter punch you in the eyel!" And she clinched her fists, menacingly.

Juan hastened to apologize.

"Wal, if ye didn't mean thet it's all right," said the girl. "But you want ter be kinder keeful w'at ye say. I hain't ther gal ter stan' any nonsense, even from a good-lookin' feller like you."

"Gracias—mil gracias! (thanks—many thanks.) If anything I do say that is not right, my apology shall be that I am not speaking in my own language."

"Wal, I s'pose you kin crawl out of it thet way. But say, you're a putty sharp-'pearin' feller. W'at fer did you want ter go be born a Greaser?"

Again Juan's face darkened, but he replied:

"I could not help my birth, senorita; it is something we cannot control. But am I any the worse for it?"

"Wal, Daddy'd never consent fer me ter hev anythin' ter do with a Greaser nohow."

"Why need you tell him?" eagerly asked Juan.

"Oh, I have to tell him everything!"

"You need not."

"He'd be shore ter find it out."

"Not if you were discreet. Oh, senorita! If I thought you could care for me, I would do anything for you! For you my life I would lay down! You I have only seen a short time ago but in my heart I feel something my tongue cannot describe!"

Then to the surprise of the laughing girl, he caught her hand and fell on his knees.

"Senorita," he cried, "for you I would pass through fire and flood! Nothing should daunt me! Of no man would I fear! I will—"

"Wal, I will be derved!"

Daddy Duzenberry appeared at this juncture, the exclamation coming from his lips, and in a moment he had Juan by the collar.

"A consarned Greaser!" snorted the old man, snapping the Mexican wooer to his feet, while Liz clapped her hands and broke into a peal of laughter. "Tryin' ter spark my gal! Wal, may I be kicked ter Glory by a muel!"

But, as he lifted his foot to administer a furious kick upon a certain portion of Juan's anatomy, the fellow suddenly squirmed aside. Up went Daddy Duzenberry's foot, and at the same instant Juan kicked the old man's other foot from beneath him. With a thud and a grunt, the irate old fellow struck fairly on his back. The Mexican's hand fell on the haft of a knife, but even as the weapon flashed in his grasp, Liz's voice rung out clear and stern:

"Hold on thar! I've got ther drop!"

A revolver gleamed in her hand, the muzzle being turned full on Juan Pacheco.

"Carajo!"

"Git!" cried the girl. "Git afore I bore ye!"

The Mexican hesitated but a moment, then he thrust the knife into its sheath, doffed his sombrero, bowed low, saying:

"Adios hasta la mananda, alma mia!" (Farewell till to-morrow, my dear.)

Then he turned and retreated with all the grace of a conqueror.

Daddy Duzenberry sat up and stared after Juan, his hand on a revolver and a comical look of disgust marking his face.

"Wal, may I be chawed up!" he gasped. "I'd like ter run a tunnel in his system, but I hain't shootin' at no man's back. How in thunder an' guns did it happen, any old how? That is a question I'd like ter hev answered."

"He downed you, Daddy," said Liz, putting up her revolver.

"He never done it!" protested the old man, doggedly. "I slipped. D'yer s'pose I'd let an ornery no-count Greaser down me? Wal, I sh'd howl! I tell ye I slipped! But I'll see thet critter erg'in an' take it out of his hide. I didn't git much of a look at ther varmint, but I thought he looked like somebody I'd seen afore."

"I thought so myself, Daddy."

While they were talking the matter over, the miner known as Red Lark approached.

"Hello, folkses," he saluted. "W'at's happened thet tickled thet Greaser so?"

Daddy Duzenberry regarded the miner suspiciously a moment, then demanded:

"W'at Greaser, pard?"

"Ther one I jest met."

"Did he 'pear tickled?"

"Tickled! He wuz jest snortin' with laffin'."

"Thet settles it!" snapped Daddy. "Stranger, look in my off eye."

"Waal?"

"W'at d'yer see?"

"Not much of anythin'."

"Thar's blood thar!" nodded the lank miner, grimly. "By ther great horn spoon, thar's blood thar!"

"Ther Greaser—"

"Is my mutton! He was laffin' 'cause I slipped an' fell down. D'yer see thet gal?"

"Yep."

"Wal, I caught ther o'nery yaller-skin makin' love to her!"

"Sho!"

"Fac'."

"W'at did ye do?"

"I lit onter his collar, pard."

"Thet wuz right. Greaser hain't no right ter make love ter a decent gal." And Red Lark stared at Liz as if he saw something that puzzled him.

The girl also seemed puzzled, for she was regarding the red-bearded miner closely. Daddy Duzenberry saw nothing of this, being too much worked up by recent events.

"Ther varmint was like a greased eel," declared the lank miner. "Somehow he slipped

about of my grip, and at ther same time I lost my footin' an' flopped down onter my back."

"Wal, I sw'ar!"

"Fac', pard."

"W'at follered?"

"Ther yaller-skin'd knifed me ef 'tadn't bin fer my gal thar. She jest yanked out a pop an' kivered him."

Once more Red Lark gazed in a puzzled manner at the girl.

"She mus' be a cuckoo!" he said.

"Wal, she hain't no slouch," was Daddy's proud declaration.

At this Liz thrust her thumb into her mouth and looked abashed.

"Wal, ef you've got thet Greaser down on ye, you want to look out right peert."

"I guess you're right."

"How long you bin stoppin' hyer?" asked the red-bearded miner, changing the subject.

"Some little time," was the vague answer.

"A right good bit?"

Daddy grunted.

"You hain't thinkin' of puttin' in a claim fer these belongin's, be ye?" he suspiciously inquired.

"Wal, not jest yit; though they do say you hain't ther rightful owner."

"Who says so?"

"Oh, I heerd it in Coffin City."

"Wal, they talk too much thar. Ther feller as built this shanty's dead. Hain't nobody ever durst work ther claim sence, but I hain't feerd of spooks."

"Nop?"

"Not by er long chalk."

"I don't s'pose you hev ever seen any sence you kem hyer?"

"Ef I had, I'd hurted it."

"How?"

"Wal, I ginerally kerry a gun."

"You'd shoot?"

"Now you're shoutin'."

"But ye can't hurt spooks."

"Wal, critters as is playin' spooks sometimes git hurted."

At this Red Lark only nodded, while he looked around as if inspecting the lay of the land.

"Thinkin' of playin' spook?" inquired Daddy Duzenberry, with a grin.

The red beard started.

"Ob, no!" he protested. "I wuz jest lookin' roun'. Wal, I'll hev ter bid ye good-day, pard. Got ter crawl back ter town. Look out fer ther Greaser."

And once more giving Liz a searching look, Red Lark turned away. The lank miner stood watching his retreating figure, a queer look on his wrinkled old face.

"Wuzn't thinkin' of playin' spook, eh?" he muttered, with a grim smile. "Mebbe not; but I'll bet you wuz!"

When he was beyond earshot, Red Lark growled:

"Thet man's too derved sharp! Tumbled ter my leetle game, fu't pop. Ther ghost business won't work. Got ter try some other way ter git persession of thet claim. I don't keer 'bout gittin' filled with bullets, an' I reckon he'd keep his word an' shoot."

"But thet gal—she sticks me! Seems like I'd seen her afore, but I can't jest place her. She looks like— But she can't be. I sw'ar, I'm puzzled!"

CHAPTER X.

PLOTTERS AT WORK.

THAT day, as the dusky twilight of evening was gathering, Juan Pacheco entered the office of Elias Slink. The lawyer was sitting in his favorite position, a cigar in his mouth and his feet on the table.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together, and he saw who his visitor was. "Have a chair, dear sir. I have just got in a new lot to-day. Had to purchase them second-hand, but they are better than no seats, I assure you. I am glad to see you. Is it news, sir—is it good news?"

"No, senor; unfortunately I cannot say it is. I thought I would tell you. It must be the velvet American has left the place."

"How is that?"

"I have been unable to find a trace of him since I saw you. He has vanished."

Down came Slink's heels.

"Is that so?" he exclaimed. "Well, now, that is bad luck! I wonder what has become of him?"

"That no one seems able to say. He is gone, that is all I can learn."

This information put Elias in anything but a pleasant mood, still his oily manner did not vanish. In a mild way, he uttered several oaths.

While he was thus occupied, "Judge" Benjamin Hogg came puffing and gurgling into the room.

"Struck it, Elias!" he croaked—"struck it!"

"Struck what? I trust, dear sir, it is something agreeable, for I do not care to hear anything more of a disagreeable sort at present."

"Wal, if this don't tickle ye, you'll never be tickled."

"What is it, sir?"

"Ther kid hes bin found!"

Both Slink and the Mexican leaped to their feet.

"The kid?" echoed Elias, in excitement. "Not the boy we are after?"

"Ther very same leetle rat."

"Who found him?"

"Your humble sarvent hed thet honor, though it's er derved wonder thet he wuzn't foun' afore. He hes bin in town sence ther stage arriv' yesterday."

"He came on the hearse?"

"Yep."

"Were any of the boys on hand when it came in?"

"Not thet I knows of."

"That explains how he escaped observation."

"I reckon."

"Where is he, judge?"

"At ther howtel."

"Stopping there?"

"Yep; got er room. Registered as Timothy Stiles."

Juan uttered a low exclamation, while Elias Slink forgot his dignity for a time and danced gleefully around the office. Suddenly he stopped, exclaiming:

"But soft, soft! There is work to be done. The Reverend Adam Jayne cannot have discovered the presence of this boy, else he would have come to me with the information. The time has not arrived for the boy to appear. He must be kept in the background. Elias, with schemes thy head should teem! If the boy is immediately forked over, we shall lose our grip on the goose that lays the golden egg. If we secure him and keep him in the background, we can still squeeze the dollars out of Adam. Ha, ha! I have a scheme!"

Juan had sunk into his seat again, but he was watching and listening with apparent interest.

"Judge," and Slink halted in his wild dance, "go thou straightway out and bring in Lank Ike and Sweet Jim. I have a use for them."

The "judge" immediately departed, but within twenty minutes he returned, accompanied by the two toughs. Although it had grown quite dark within the lawyer's office, Slink had not produced a light.

"It is quite unnecessary," he asserted, as he made the door secure to prevent intrusion. "I have no curtain to the window, and a light would betray us to any one who paused to look in. We can talk as well in the dark."

"An' I reckon ther most of us look as well in ther dark as we do any time," gurgled Hogg.

The five men gathered around the square table.

"Now ther fu't thing is—w'at?" inquired Lank Ike. "W'at's in ther wind?"

The explanation was made that the boy for whom they had been watching had walked into the trap at last.

"Now, gentlemen," purred Slink, and they could hear him rubbing his hands together, "how are we to get our hands on this boy without raising a rumpus?"

"Easy enough," was Hogg's gurgling reply. "From the register I larned he hed room Number 8, an' thet room kin be reached from ther ruff of ther lean-to. Ike an' Jim kin creep in thar ter-night an' choke ther kid quiet, then they kin kerry him off ter any place they want ter."

"Senors," broke in the quiet voice of Juan, "I trust you will give me a chance to take a part."

"Course we will, ef ye want it."

"I do."

"Then you can accompany Ike and Jim," decided Slink, "for I am in favor of carrying out the judge's little scheme. But where shall the boy be taken to when we have him?"

"I know a safe place whar he will keep all right," declared Sweet Jim. "Tain't more'n three miles outer town either."

"What is it?"

"A small cave."

"Good! Take him there and watch him closely, for there is money in his skin. I have paid you fellows well for your past services, and you shall be well paid for this job. I leave everything to your good judgment. Do not be

too hasty; wait till the camp is quiet before you make a move. Do not fail, for your lives!"

"Trust us, boss," chuckled Ike. "We know our biz, an' we'll git thar with both feet."

Little did the plotters dream their conversation had been overheard by a hated enemy.

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER PUZZLED MAN.

AFTER immersing his head in the bucket of cold water and drying it on a towel that had seen arduous duty since it was washed the last time, Adam Jayne placed a soft felt hat on his head and left the cabin.

Proceeding to the hotel, he ate quite a hearty meal, after which he started for a walk in the open air.

The sun was well down behind the western peaks and evening was approaching.

By chance, Adam turned his steps down the creek. Walking slowly along, he mused on the situation, muttering his thoughts aloud.

"Such confounded luck is disgusting! Just as success was reached the game was blocked for the time. I succeeded in disposing of the girl, but the boy still lives and keeps beyond my clutch.

"What a fool Brother Saul was to leave his wealth to those brats! When his wife left him, she took the children with her, and he never saw them afterwards up to his very death. He tried to keep track of his wife and the children, but failed, and when he died, he did not know if they were living. The property was to go to the children if they were living; were they dead, it fell to Jonas and myself.

"Sincerely hoping the kids were dead, I started out to trace them. I found the mother was dead, but the children were still living, though separated. I found the girl first and was taking her with me to Memphis when she accidentally fell overboard from the steamer and was drowned. There was a young fool who jumped over after her, but neither was recovered. They perished together.

"Then I tracked down the boy, and found him living down here with the miner known as Old Luckless. The miner had enemies who were willing to put an end to his existence, and my money easily set a trap which the boy fell into. There seemed no way of escape, and he would have followed the girl, but for the interference of that fellow known as Violet Vane. He got the boy off, and has managed to keep him concealed ever since.

"But I am not a man to stop at trifles, had I been, I should have given it up as a bad job long ago. Now I am determined to win. When this boy is found, the whole affair will be terminated in a short time."

Thus muttering aloud of his crooked schemes, the hypocritical rascal sauntered along. When fairly beyond the limit of the town, he had produced and lighted a cigar, and he was enjoying a smoke.

Adam continued down the stream till he came to where Daddy Duzenberry was industriously rocking the cradle, working the placer originally discovered by Old Luckless.

"I say, you," called Jayne, after he had watched the old man for some time.

Daddy looked up, and, seeing who addressed him, something like a look of contempt passed over his face.

"Wal?"

"How much can you make a day at that?"

"Something less than a thousan' dollars."

"I should imagine so," snapped Adam. "I knew that."

"Then if ye knew ser much, w'at made ye ax me?"

"I thought I would receive a civil answer, old man."

"Seems like you're mighty int'usted in my business."

"It is not that, but I have always had a desire to know about how much a man can make in that way."

"Sho! Think we're paid by ther day?"

"Oh, no; I understand you get what you wash out. But I am curious to know how much that is."

"Sometimes it's more; sometimes it's less."

Adam scowled.

"You are an ill-mannered old curmudgeon!"

Daddy deliberately turned round and stared at Jayne, his hands on his hips and his arms akimbo. There was a twinkle of mingled anger and mirth in his keen eyes.

"Dunno but I'll hev ter do it," he finally said, spitting on his hands and rubbing them together.

"Do what?"

"Give ye a spankin', same as I did thet no-brained son of yourn."

"Try it, if you dare!" cried Adam, retreating several steps, his hand going back toward his hip-pocket.

"You don't mean ter say you'd shoot?"

"I certainly would."

"Wal, you're a bigger fool then I thought. W'y, looker yere!"

Quick as thought, Daddy snapped out a revolver and covered Jayne, who turned very pale, and dodged as if to get out of range.

"Take yer han' off thet barker!" sternly commanded the old miner. "Lively thar, ur I'll run a tunnel in yer anatomy! I mean ole business."

Adam immediately released his grasp on his own weapon, quickly crying:

"Hold on, hold on! I did not mean anything! Can't you stand a little sport, old man?"

Daddy laughed, shortly.

"Oh, yep; I'm a great boy fer sport," he asserted. "But you see I'm mighty fly. They don't git ther yank on ther ole gent very oftun, you bet. So you wuz in fun?"

"Of course I was."

"Waal, it's mighty danger'us. I once knew a feller thet reached fer his hankerhook; t'other feller thought he wuz goin' fer his gun, so he pulled an' fired. They foun' out arterwards thet ther fu'st one didn't hev no gun. So he—"

"Daddy, supper is ready."

Liz came dancing through the dusky shadows of the gathering twilight, but paused with a low exclamation, finding herself face to face with Adam Jayne. At sound of the girl's voice, the bogus clergyman gave a great start and muttered something like an oath of dismay or fear.

"Great God!"

Adam Jayne gasped the words, as he stared at the girl's face like a man fascinated. His own features were transformed by an expression of genuine horror.

And Liz seemed scarcely less moved. She shrunk from the man, as if in deadly fear, then, turning quickly, she fled toward the cabin.

Adam Jayne started to follow, but Daddy Duzenberry's hand checked him. Pointing toward Coffin City, the old miner uttered one word:

"Git!"

"But that girl! She is—"

"GIT!"

The revolver in the old man's hands emphasized his words. Jayne saw the uselessness of making any talk, and like one dazed, he staggered away. Daddy Duzenberry stood watching him till his form was lost in the shadows.

For considerable distance Jayne walked along his legs shaking under him and his teeth chattering. At length, he exclaimed, brokenly:

"The dead cannot return to life! She was drowned in the river! But that girl had her voice! It was a most remarkable resemblance. It is impossible that Jennie Kenyon escaped, and yet—"

He did not finish the sentence.

It was quite dark when he reached town. Entering the cabin, he found Jonas swinging in the hammock, a lighted lamp illuminating the room. At sight of his father's face the younger rascal exclaimed:

"Baw Jove! you are white ath a theet! You look like you had theen a ghoht?"

"And I feel as if I had," confessed the shaken man.

CHAPTER XII.

TROUBLE IN THE JIM DANDY SALOON.

"THE Jim Dandy" was the principal saloon of Coffin City, and into that resort Leon Forest made his way on the second evening after his arrival in town. Red Lark was within the saloon, and promptly approached the tenderfoot.

"Hello, pard," saluted the miner. "Lookin' round over ther town?"

Leon nodded.

"Lookin' arter anything in pertwickerler?"

"Oh, no; only seeking to pass away the time."

"Come in fer a drink?"

"I do not drink."

"Is thet so? Don't reckon ye hev got any wings sproutin'? You must be a little better'n common peoples!"

Leon scarcely liked the man's manner, still he had no care to make the red-bearded fellow his enemy, and, by the "balmy" smell of Lark's breath, it was evident he had been drinking.

"Not at all," was his quiet reply. "I am just a common, every-day sort of fellow. Does it make me any the less a man because I do not drink?"

"Not er derved bit!" heartily replied the red-bearded miner, extending his hand, which was promptly accepted by the young man. "Ef

you stick ter thet, you'll kem out all right in ther eend, an' be er derved sight better off nor them as guzzles ther cussid stuff. I take a drap now an' then, but I know I am er blamed fool fer doin' of it. It hes made me er shiftless, no 'count sort of a critter, an' it may be ther death of me yit."

"Why don't you put on the brakes—chain up?"

"Waal, I'm allus tellin' myself I will, but I dunno as I ever shell. Thet's ther way w'en a feller gits ter turnin' down ther stuff. He's allus promisin' hisself he's goin' ter make a break putty soon, an' he means it, but he never gits ter do it. It's allus some time in ther future. An' so he goes it tell he gits ter seein' snakes. W'en er man gits thet fur, thar hain't much show fer him, boy. His goose is purt' nigh cooked, fer his hull system's all outer kilter, an' he hain't in no shape ter live like other people. He's got ter hev fire-water ter keep hisself braced, an' ginerally he swills tell he kicks ther bucket. Ther pesky p'ison's all right in its place, but it's stuff thet can't be kep' in its place. Thet's w'at's ther matter with the ole-fashioned lady we call Hannah!"

"You would make quite a temperance-lec-urer, Lark."

"Dunno but I w'd. Never thort of thet afore. I might try thet business. Reckon' I'd be as bones' as most of ther critters as go yoopin' roun' ther country ter shout an' yowl on ther platform an' take a nip behin' ther door some-whar. I've allus made a failure at ev'ry thing I've tried, p'raps I kin come out top of ther heap as a temperance crank. Who knows? Boy, your suggestion may mean my fortune!"

Leon joined in the man's hearty laugh.

"Do you know Adam Jayne?" inquired the younger man.

"Waal, I sh'u'd shout! I hain't bin hyer but one hull day an' part of another, but I've got ther run of the place an' ther people purt' derved well. Adam Jayne is ther biggest blamed two-faced skunk that ever pertended ter be pious!"

"I do not know the man by sight, but I heartily agree with you. If there is a more dastardly hypocrite on the face of the earth, the world must be unfortunate, indeed!"

"You say you don't know him?"

"Not by sight."

"Waal, you must hev heard of him?"

"I should say so."

"Waal, now look at me! Do I look like a coward? No! Still, in your ear I would whisker ther fatal words: *I am!* Sad an' turrible as it may seem ter you, my brave young frien', I am a pore, miser'ble coward! I know it, an' it fills all my soul with a feelin' of disgust an' loathin' fer Red Lark! I hev enemies hyer in Coffin City, an' Adam Jayne is one of 'em, cuss him! Ef I wuz not a coward, I'd meet 'em like a man! But I don't durst—I don't durst!"

Leon was surprised by the man's singular manner and words, and he began to understand that Red Lark had not come to Coffin City in a time of idle roaming. The miner had a purpose in visiting the place.

"If Adam Jayne is your enemy, then you and I should surely be the best friends imaginable, for he is mine. We should form a combine against him."

"Right, lad, right!"

"Is it a go?"

"You bet!"

"We will stick by each other through thick and thin, and in everything we will work against Adam Jayne?"

"Yep."

"But you must let up drinking, if you want to become my pard."

"I'll do it, tenderfut."

"That settles it! Your hand, Lark!"

Again their hands met in a firm grasp.

"This is ther combine thet'll down ole Adam," chuckled the red-bearded fellow. "Anyhow, he's got two enemies in this yere camp."

"He has more than two. There is yet another of whom I know."

"Who's thet?"

"A sport who calls himself Violet Vane."

"I've heard of ther feller. Ef ther yarns they tell of him are true, he's er terror on trucks."

"I have heard as much."

"Ever see him?"

"Yes."

"Lately?"

"Yes."

"Whar?"

"He was at the hotel yesterday."

"Then he is in this town?"

"Yes."

"Ef thet's so, we're ap' ter see him in hyer

ter-night. He'd be purt' sure ter stick his nose inter ther chief saloon of ther town."

"Who is that big fat bloot over at the bar?"

"That? W'y, boy! that's Judge Benjamin Hogg; though whar he ever got any right ter ther title of jedge is more then any man kin tell. He is in with ther wu'st critters of ther place, an' he kin drink more bug-juice then a little bit."

"Well, I have noticed he is turning down the liquor pretty freely."

"You bet! See them two critters with him now?"

"Sure."

"Them's Lank Ike an' Sweet Jim, an' ef two cusses ever desarved ther rope, it's them! They are p'ison!"

"You are remarkably well-posted for the short time you have been in camp."

"I have made it my business ter git posted, fer I hed an objec' in doin' so. I didn't kem ter Coffin City fer ther fun of ther ride, son."

At this moment Jonas Jayne sauntered into the saloon. He was attired in a suit of clothes which Red Lark declared were "so loud they c'd be heard a mile." He wore a silk hat, carried a cane, and was smoking a cigarette, as usual.

"See thet thing?" snorted Lark. "Waal, ef thet wuzn't ole Jayne's brat an' ole Jayne wuzn't in with ther toughs of this town, thet'd be shot dead ther minute it stepped inter this saloon. Ther boys 'u'd fetch a yoop an' all pull the'r pops at ther same time; then, without any funder fuss, they'd jest riddle it. It's lucky fer him thet ole Jayne's his dad."

Jonas sauntered up to the bar and ordered whisky. "Judge" Hogg and his companions crowded around, expecting the dude would offer to treat. Finding he was not going to do so, Hogg cried:

"Say, looker hyer, Jonas, are we in it?"

"Aw?"

"Hain't ye goin' ter set 'em up?"

The young man's nose curled somewhat contemptuously, as he surveyed the fat and greasy individual before him.

"What should I thet 'em up for?" he asked.

"Fer yer ole dad's sake," replied the "judge," scowling. "This hain't no place fer you ter be too mighty fine. We're onter thet dad of yourn with both feet. Jest now he's our frien', but ef you don't treat—Waal, we know how ter talk."

Jonas turned very red and muttered something like an oath, then he said:

"Why, thirs, if you are fwriends of me paw's, I thurely will tweat."

"I knowed it," chuckled Hogg. "Straight whisk', barkeep'."

Lank Ike and Sweet Jim also took whisky.

The ice having been broken in this manner, Jonas indulged freely, his tongue swiftly becoming loosened.

"I thay," he cried, tipping his silk hat far back on his head, and leaning against the bar, while he lighted a fresh cigarette with the still burning stub of the one just smoked, "I'm a pretty good feller, baw Jovel!"

"That's a fac'," nodded "Judge" Hogg. "Nobody'd ever s'pect it ter look at ye, but you hain't hafe bad."

"I've got the wocks, too," boasted the shallow-brained fop. "Paw, he ponieth up, ye know. I'm going to fall wight into a big fortune pretty thoon. When I git it, I will make the fur fly. I will dwive a team of my own, then, baw Jovel!"

"It's a sure thing, is it?" asked the "judge," winking at one of his companions.

"Well, I thould thmile!" was Jonas's reply. "Paw ith a shawp one, you can bet on that. He knowth hith buithness, evvy time."

"He looks it."

"He don't like to have medwink," the shallow youth continued. "But he cawn't help it verwy well. He thometimeth taketh a thmile him-thelf."

"Is thet so?"

"Thure. He liketh it ath well ath the west of uth."

"But how 'bout thet forchune?"

"Oh, that ith all wight! We are thure to get there, ye know."

"That settles my last doubt!" softly exclaimed Leon Forest, who had been eagerly listening to the young man's words. "I am sure now Adam Jayne is the double-faced villain I took him to be."

"Then you know suthin' 'bout thet forchune business?" spoke Red Lark.

"Perhaps."

"Crooked game ther ole cuss is onto?"

"You have hit it."

"You are meanin' ter block it?"

"If I can."

"I'm yer pard; I'll help yer."

Jonas continued his boasting talk, till suddenly Adam Jayne entered the saloon.

"Hello!" cried the young man. "There ish paw!"

With his face drawn into a look of deepest sorrow, Adam advanced toward his wayward son.

"Jonas," came solemnly from his lips, "only the Lord knows how it wrings my paternal heart to see you in such a place as this! It is with difficulty I can restrain my tears."

"How did you happen to come in, paw?"

"I was looking for you, my son."

"That ith a gweat guy, guv. Weekon you came in faw a thmile, old man?"

"Jonas!"

"Yeth, thir."

"You have been drinking! You must come away with me at once. I shall spend the night in humiliation and prayer."

"Oh, cheeth it, paw! That wacket ith played out, ye know!"

Adam's hand fell on his son's shoulder.

"Come!" he said, sternly.

"Don't be in thuch a wush, paw. Hold on and we'll have a dwink together."

The elder Jayne seemed on the point of bursting into tears.

"Oh, that I should have lived to see this!" he moaned. "The Lord has seen fit to send a heavy affliction upon me, and I trust he will give me strength to bear it like a good Christian."

"You thould have a thmile to bwace you up, guv."

"You know I never touch the demon's drink, my son. Come; I will stay in this place of sin no longer."

"Well, jutht wait till I have one more dwink."

But Adam would not wait. He insisted on leading Jonas away, which made the young man quite angry.

As they were passing toward the door, Jonas tried to break from his father's restraining hand. In this he succeeded, but he stumbled in an awkward manner and fell against Leon Forest, who, with Red Lark, was standing a short distance from the door.

Instead of apologizing, he uttered a snarl of rage and struck at Leon with his cane. But he did not hit the young man.

Springing aside, Leon caught the cane and wrenched it from its owner's hand.

"Have a care what you are doing!" he sternly cried.

For a moment Jonas was too astounded to speak, then he began to remove his coat, crying: "Baw Jovel I will thow you manerth, ye know!"

"A fight! a fight!"

The crowd surged toward the point of trouble, eager to witness the fun.

"Hold on!" cried Adam Jayne, springing forward. "I cannot allow this! Hold on, I say!"

"Sthand back, paw, and hold my coat," said Jonas. "I have been inthulted, and by gwa-thuth! I am going to lick the impwudent w'etch that did it! That ith the kind of a hair-pin I am!"

CHAPTER XIII.

VIOLET VANE ON HAND.

JONAS really meant to fight. He had absorbed enough liquor to give him a fictitious courage, and just then he imagined he was the match for any man on legs.

Adam really tried to prevent the encounter, but the crowd was delighted at the prospect, and he was hustled aside in an unceremonious manner.

Deliberately Jonas removed his coat, passing it to a spectator to hold.

"Come, thir!" he cried, as he saw Leon was making no preparations. "I am going to punch your eye, thir."

Forest contemptuously tossed the cane on the floor at the feet of the slightly intoxicated dude.

"You had better take your father's advice and go home," he declared.

"Oh, I had, had I!" squawked Jonas, flapping his arms very much as if they were a pair of wings. "You think tho, do you! Well, thir, I will go home after I have bwoken your nothe. Get off your coat, thir!"

"You'll hev ter fight ther fool, lad," muttered Red Lark. "Jest strip an' go fer him. Knock ther packin' outer his skin, ef you love me!"

"You commenced this," protested Leon. "Had you not stumbled against me and then

tried to strike me with your cane, it would have been all right. I do not want to fight with you."

"Well, you have got to do tho, jutht the thame. I am going to thow you where you belong, thir."

"It is plain you are not where you belong. If you were, you would not be here."

"Ith that tho? Where would I be?"

"In an asylum for idiots."

At this Jonas uttered a squealing howl and made a rush for Leon. The tenderfoot seemed quite unprepared, but he met the charge without quailing. Jonas struck out with both fists, one after the other, and the blows were neatly parried, then—

Smack-smack!

With his open hands, Forest had slapped the furious dandy on both cheeks.

"Oh-o-ol! Good gwathuth!"

Clinging to his tingling cheeks, Jonas danced about in a lively manner, his gyrations eliciting bursts of wild laughter from the spectators.

"Brace up, Tall Hat!"

"Go for him again, Cigarettes!"

"Hit him in the same place!"

Red Lark was delighted.

"Good boy!" he exclaimed, slapping his hands together. "I'll resk you, pard!"

"You hain't done, are ye, Jonas?" inquired "Judge" Hogg, anxiously.

"No, I am not!" snapped the dude. "If you felloth will keep sthill and mind your buithness, I will attend to thith job!"

"Well, w'at are ye doin' now?"

"I am only wethting."

"You get tired easy!"

Jonas turned toward Leon, who was quietly regarding him, his hands hanging in a natural position by his sides.

"I thpose you think you are thmart!"

Leon's reply was a smile.

"Well, I am going to thow you thome points," boasted the coxcomb. "I wath only fooling that time."

"Ditto."

Deliberately Jonas removed his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves, displaying a very ordinary pair of arms.

"Thith meanth that I am going to annihilate you," he declared.

Having made these arrangements, he cautiously approached his opponent, standing on guard in a boxing attitude. But Leon did not even raise his hands. Observing this, Jonas fancied he saw a chance to end the battle with a few sharp strokes, and he let himself out.

Once more he met with a surprising set-back.

Leon dodged his blows and gave him a crack on the jaw that sent him staggering back into the arms of "Judge" Hogg, who prevented him from falling limply to the floor.

(Goodneth gwathuth!)

Jonas faintly gasped the words, staring upward at the ceiling.

"I thought a piece of the woof had fallen in," he explained. "What did he stwike me with?"

"Nothing but his fist, pard."

"Oh, come off! It wath a club, baw Jovel!"

"I reckon not."

"Well, it wath! I weekon I know a club when it hits me. I am not going to fight any more, ye know, if he don't fight fair. I cawn't afford to have me jaw bwoken with a club."

It was with great difficulty he was convinced he had been struck by nothing but Leon Forest's bare knuckles. Even then he insisted it was not fair.

"I wath not weady," he asserted. "Thith jumping on a feller when he ith not pwepared, ith too thin."

"He will most prob'ly wait tell you are ready next time."

"I gueth I don't want to fight any more."

But, on being urged not to give it up in that way, he decided to try it again.

"Thith time I will thwash the wascal," he asserted.

Slowly and deliberately he crept toward Leon, in whose ear Red Lark hoarsely whispered:

"Plug him one on the nose this time, pard! Make him see stars!"

Jonas was shy; experience had taught him he had not tackled an easy job.

"Jutht you come at me once," he entreated.

"I'll therve you the thame ath you did me. Jutht you make a wush once."

"Well," smiled Leon, "if that is what you are waiting for, here goes."

Then he sprang at Jonas with a promptness which made it impossible for the coxcomb to avoid him. Jonas struck out at Leon's face, but wasted the blow on empty air. The following moment the stroke was returned, and the ten-

derfoot's hard fist landed on the dandy's nose, bringing a howl from the victim's lips and a gush of claret from his nasal organ.

"Oh-o-o!" howled Jonas. "I am murdered, ye know!"

At this instant Adam Jayne succeeded in forcing his way into the ring, and seeing the blood on his son's face and hearing Jonas's cries, he fancied his offspring had been stabbed. With a snarl of fury, he snatched out a revolver and leaped toward Leon Forest, intent on discharging the weapon at such short range that there would be no chance of making a miss and dropping the wrong man.

But Adam Jayne's deadly purpose was never accomplished.

A second figure leaped into the circle, the toe of a patent-leather boot sent the revolver spinning over the heads of the spectators, and a cool voice cried:

"Hold a little on here! Violet Vane will take a hand, if you please!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A DEADLOCK.

It was the Velvet Sport himself, fresh, smiling and handsome. He was on hand, and he had made his presence known after the vigorous manner which usually characterized his movements.

As the weapon was kicked from his fingers, Adam Jayne started back with an exclamation of surprise and dismay.

"Judge" Benjamin Hogg gurgled in a choking manner, while the hands of the two toughs, Lank Ike and Sweet Jim, fell upon the butts of ready weapons.

"This is no killing affair, pards," smiled Violet Vane. "So far it has been a fair fight, and the best man has won. What is the use of making a mess of it all by using a sticker! Slow and easy, gentlemen!"

"Confound you!" snarled the elder Jayne. "What right have you to interfere?"

"The right of a man who delights in seeing fair play," bowed the Sport. "You were a trifle hasty, sir, and about to do a thing you might afterward regret—though I am not so sure about that."

"This fellow has stabbed my son!"

"Stabbed him with a good hard fist—yes. He did it very prettily too. I really admire the manner in which he attended to that little job."

"My boy is bleeding—"

"At the nose. His loss of the crimson fluid will not be very serious, I fancy. It surely cannot be as weakening as those villainous cigarettes he smokes. Those things will rob a pretty good man of what manhood he may possess. I scarcely wonder he proved anything but a match for this young man here."

Adam made the discovery that Jonas was not seriously injured, but this did not seem to appease his anger. He had been humiliated before the crowd, and Jonas had received a whipping. Those things were too much for human nature to bear.

"This affair did not concern you; you had no business to interfere in—"

"I simply prevented you from committing another murder."

Adam gasped:

"Another murder!"

"That is what I said."

"What do you mean?"

The face of the sanctimonious rascal had turned very pale, and some of the spectators observed his hands shook a little.

"I fancied my meaning was plain."

"It is not."

"Do you wish me to make it plainer?"

"I certainly do."

"Then you wish me to speak of the past—you would have me mention a little job you performed on a certain Mississippi River boat, eh?"

But Adam Jayne did not make an immediate reply. In truth, he was too alarmed and astounded to do so.

"You do not seem very anxious for me to mention these things," smiled Violet Vane. "There is no need of mentioning them now; you will have to answer for your crimes soon enough."

The blood rushed to the schemer's face and he shook his clenched hands at the Sport.

"You cur!" he snarled. "Your insinuations fairly took away my breath for a time. I can stand a great deal of abuse, for I am a humble servant of the Lord; but this is almost too much for a saint. Sir, I know not what you mean by your insulting words!"

"I suppose not, and I do not wonder at it."

If I were in your place—which, thank Heaven, I am not—I should not want to understand anything of the kind. If I stood in your boots, I should want to forget the past."

This only made Adam more angry.

"How dare you heap such insults upon me!" he spluttered. "You shall pay dearly for it!"

Then he turned to the crowd, crying:

"Down him!—down that fool!"

Hogg and his pals seemed ready to obey the command, but a pair of gleaming weapons flashed in the hands of the Velvet Sport, and his voice sounded stern and clear:

"Hold hard! I will sink a shaft in the first man who tries it!"

"And I will serve the same sauce to his pard!" declared Leon Forest, stepping to the side of the man who had befriended him, his right hand filled by the butt of a business-like revolver.

"Reckon I'll hev ter chip in'thar," observed Red Lark, as he also produced a pair of self-cocking revolvers and ranged himself at Vane's side. "How do you critters like ther looks of this gang! Think you'll straddle us ter once't without stoppin' ter ax our permit?"

The toughs drew back with exclamations of rage and dismay.

"They don't seem ter like it wu'th er cent," laughed the red-bearded miner.

But Adam Jayne was not ready to back down. He urged the ruffianly gang to stand by him, several of Ike and Jim's friends having shown an inclination to take sides against the Velvet Sport and his friends.

"Let 'em come," growled Lark. "We three are part'nigh enough fer the hull o'ner gang."

"We can make it pleasant for them," smiled Vane, seeming in no way concerned by the ominous manner of the scowling toughs.

"You critters better keep out of this yere muss," said "Judge" Hogg, speaking to Leon and Lark. "You kin git out now without ary bit of trouble, but thet derved galoot in velvet togs hes got ter come under."

This caused Vane to laugh.

"I seem to be the mutton you are looking after now."

"You bet! You are ther very critter we hev been wantin' ter git our claws onter."

"Well, you have not got your claws there yet."

"Jest as good. You can't 'scape us."

"Is that so?"

"I'm shoutin'."

"Well, let me tell you something: you and pards will do mighty well if they escape me. I am after your rotten gang with a split stick, and I am not going to let up till I ruin the crooked game that sleek hypocrite there is trying to play."

Jayne actually squirmed beneath these scathing words.

"You daring emissary of Satan!" he grated.

"It is not fair to apply your own especial title to any one else," was the instant retort.

"You are a villain!"

"I can return the compliment—with interest."

"You are the dastard who stole away my dear nephew."

"I am the person who saved him from your machinations."

"Ha! he has confessed it! He is a kidnapper!"

"Better than a murderer!"

"Where have you hidden my dear nephew?"

"So he is dear? I have no doubt of it. He has already cost you considerable money, and before you succeed in killing him—as you tried to do—he will cost you more."

"Answer my question!"

"What if I decline?"

"You shall be forced to answer."

"I am a mighty hard horse to drive."

"You had better tell where ther kid is," was Hogg's gurgling declaration.

"Now, what do you want with him?"

"He is charged with murder; he killed Old Luckless."

"And you were the well-paid wretch who pronounced him guilty. You were the Judge Lynch of the occasion. I was there, and I rendered another verdict—not guilty! That was right, and the time will come when the boy shall stand free and clear of the wretched net which the money of a contemptible uncle caused to be set for his unsuspecting feet! It will yet be shown that my verdict was the true one."

"Will you tell where the boy is?" Jayne again demanded.

"No!"

"Then we'll make you!"

With a smile, Vane displayed the revolvers.

"That is much easier said than done."

"You will not be fool enough to resist this crowd?"

"It is plain you do not know me."

"It will be suicide on your part."

"That is where you make a big mistake. I am very handy with the pops, and, if I were quite alone, I could thin out your gang in a wonderful manner."

"An' he hain't erlone," put in Red Lark. "Me an' my pard is standin' ter his back tell ther cows come home."

"Fools!" hissed Adam Jayne. "You will only share his fate."

"Thet won't be hard."

"These friends of mine do not seem to be easily frightened," laughed the Sport. "Things do not work exactly as you would like them to, do they, Adam?"

Once more Jayne turned to the crowd and urged them to attack the three defiant men, and once more Vane and his companions stood ready for the onset.

"We will have to shoot for business if they try to jump us," came calmly from the velvet dandy's lips. "But I trust we will be able to bluff them off. If they do come for us, the affair is sure to have a serious termination. It may mean the rope for us, so if you want to get out while there is time—"

"Now, hole on, pard!" broke in Red Lark. "W'at fer kind of stuff d'ye take us? D'yer s'pose we'd slump back on ye arter you stepped in ter help Leon byer? Wal, you must think we're mighty mean goods!"

"I beg your pardon. I suppose the row is as much yours as mine."

"Now you're shoutin'!"

"Then we will hang together."

"Ef we hang a-tall, we will."

At this moment, apparently in a distant part of the room, a voice cried:

"The velvet American cannot escape his doom! Juan the Merciless is on his track!"

"Great thutter!" spluttered Lark. "Who wuz thet?"

Vane smiled.

"Only a deluded Mexican who has been following me around," was his reply. "He has not the courage to face me like a man. I care nothing for him."

"Dern ther Greasers!" growled Lark. "They are ther wu'st! I'd keer more fer them then fer any other kind of er critter, fer one never knows w'en they'll stick him in ther back."

By this time Jayne had succeeded in firing the toughs till they seemed on the verge of launching themselves upon the three men who faced them so boldly.

"Better make your wills, pards," fell from the lips of the Velvet Sport, as the hammers of his handsome self-acting revolvers were seen to rise somewhat from the pressure of his fingers on the triggers. "You will never have another chance after you come at us."

"Solid hoss sense," assured Red Lark. "You will find us er mighty big doset ter swaller without greasin'."

"What's ther raow heur, anyhaow?" inquired a drawling voice, as the long arms of Old Daddy Duzenberry made a path through the crowd. "If thar's any fun, I'd like ter come inter ther game."

Reaching the center, he surveyed the situation, then promptly stepped to the side of Violet Vane and his friends.

"Guess I'll hev ter fall in with ther weaker side," he grinned. "Thet may show a lack of good hoss-sense on my part, but I can't help it. I'm allus makin' er fool of myself. When I wuz a boy they said I wuz the dangdest blockhead in Harmony. Thet wuz whar I wuz brung up. It's 'way daown in Maine, whar they raise pine stumps an' cider."

While he was saying this he was also deliberately feeling around in his pockets, as if searching for something he could not readily find.

"Gosh blast it!" he mumbled.

But, after a time, a grin spread over his countenance.

"Found 'em!" he declared, with an odd twist of his head. "I allus fergit w'at pocket I kerry 'em in. Sometimes it is kinder onhandy w'en I want 'em in er hurry, then, erg'in, 'tain't ser bad. Feller stopped me an' axed fer my money ur my gizzard oncet. I fished all raound my clothes fer my puss, but arter a w'ile I found these."

He produced a pair of heavy revolvers, and deliberately cocked them.

"He looked s'prised like w'en I tuck 'em aout," chuckled Daddy, in his odd way. "But w'en I shot a hole right through his liver, so big thet you could kick a dog through it, he wuz a great deal more s'prised. He concluded he did—"

n't keer so much fer my money arter all, an' I hev heerd he laid right daown thar whar I met him an' died. I can't say it is true, fer I didn't 'tend ther funeral. It wuz an oversight on my part, an' I hev allus regretted it. I oughter hev went as chief mourner."

"Satan has many friends!" muttered Adam Jayne, as he saw this new addition to the force of the hated enemy.

"Thet's so, by Judas!" agreed Daddy Duzenberry. "An' ef ther Ole Feller hain't got you on ther list, it's a big oversight on his part."

It was plain the toughs were filled with dismay at this new addition to the force opposing them. They seemed far from ready to attack Violet Vane and his friends. Again Jayne urged them on, but this time his words were wasted.

"Tain't no good," gurgled Hogg. "Ther boys won't butt erg'in' all thet gang. Thet Vierlet Vane is er holy howler with a gun, an' I 'low Ole Duzenberry hain't ser slow as he looks. As fer Reddy an' ther kid, they'd count some. Ef ther boys tried ter down ther crowd, thar'd be ther wu'st ruction you ever saw, an' jest likely's not you'd be ther fust ter be socked with a lead pill."

This caused Adam to turn pale and lose some of his ardor.

"But are we going to let them get away?" he asked, helplessly.

"Don't see no way out of it."

Jayne was furious. When he saw Violet Vane, he had hoped to overpower the Sport and force from his lips a confession of the whereabouts of the missing boy; but now such a course seemed out of the question.

"May the Lord give us strength to overcome the minions of the Evil One!" murmured the two-faced hypocrite.

"It ith not a go, paw," put in Jonas, who had succeeded in checking the flow of blood from his nose. "You may ath well give it up and help me out of thith blawsted plathe."

"Had you not come to this den of infamy, my son, all would have been well."

"Oh, give uth a west. I am not going to sthand any more of that sthuff, ye know!"

Adam produced his handkerchief and wiped away an imaginary tear.

"My heart has been wrung with anguish," he sobbed. "It is a terrible thing to consider the wickedness and sin there is in this small world. For all of the efforts of the servants of the Lord, iniquity seems on the increase. Ah, hum!"

Jonas passed his arm through that of his father.

"Come, paw."

Then they made their way toward the door, and left the saloon together. Sweet Jim followed them, and just outside, Adam turned toward the tough, saying in a low voice:

"Go back and watch Violet Vane! Find out where that boy is and help me get possession of him and I will pay you five hundred dollars!"

Then the two Jaynes went onward, leaving the astonished tough at the door.

"Five hundred dollars!" he gasped. "All thet ter fine ther kid! Great Moses! I know whar ther kid is now!"

CHAPTER XV.

HOT WORK AT HAND.

THE departure of the Jaynes was the signal for hostile demonstrations to end. The toughs turned toward the bar, and the four men who had braved their intended attack were left to themselves.

"Wal," grinned Daddy Duzenberry, "this seems ter be ther eend of ther fun. Thar wasn't much to it," he added, regretfully.

"Your appearance frightened them off," jest-ed Vane.

"Wal, I dunno's I wonder," was the reply. "I guess I look bad enough ter skeer most anybody. I'm gal-danged glad I wuz roun' ter take er han'."

"Well, your aid came in very appropriate. They were on the point of coming at us when you chipped."

"Looked that way."

"We should have been in hot water soon."

"Then I sp'iled a good raow?"

"Yes."

"Jest my luck! I chipped in 'specting' ter hev some fun."

"You are always looking after fun, Daddy."

"You bet yer I be, pard! I'm detarmined ter go fer all ther fun I kin git outer this life."

"Well, I fancy the fun is not over, by any means."

"Haow's thet?"

"I think there will be hot work somewhere in Coffin City or its suburbs before morning."

"W'at makes ye think so?"

"I have good reasons."

"Are you goin' ter take er han'?"

"I shall try to be around."

"Can't ye let us in?"

"Well, it is possible. I should be pleased if you will hold yourselves ready to aid me in case of emergency."

"We will do that," declared Leon Forest.

"I am ready to do what I can for you, for you saved my life. Adam Jayne would have taken me by surprise when there was no weapon in my hand. I thank you for the prompt manner in which you disarmed him."

"I was delighted at having an opportunity to balk that hypocritical wretch. His schemes will all come to naught in the end, and he will receive the just reward of his crooked work."

"I hope so."

"If I could only prove he was at the bottom of the murder of Old Luckless, I would soon wind up his career. If I had proof of that, I would not wait for his tools to go on with the work they have planned; but, as I cannot prove it, I must give them rope enough to hang themselves and their master. When they have fully insnared themselves, then I will crush them."

"I hope you'll need help ter do ther crushin' act. I want ter git er finger inter ther pie."

"An' so do I," declared Red Lark.

"I would not object to having a hand," asserted Leon.

"If I only had absolute proof of one crime I know this Jayne committed, I would soon have him dangling at the end of a rope," asserted Vane.

"Was it that of which you charged him?"

"Yes."

"Then you believe the man truly capable of murder?"

"I believe he would stop at nothing to gain his ends."

"And I think so, too."

"But haow about thet Greaser?" asked Daddy Duzenberry. "I hev seen ther critter. He actually tried ter make love ter my gal, b'gosh! I knowed his voice soon's I heerd him yoop. He'll be knifin' you, pard."

"I shall have to take my chances," was Vane's quiet reply. "If the fellow would meet me like a man—"

"But he won't, he won't!" Daddy snapped. "Don't I know suthin' of ther critters? Tried ter make love ter my gal! Foun' him daown on his knees, with her han' in his! Woosh! I kem nigh faintin'!"

"What did you do?"

"Do? You bet I lit on his neck!"

"W'at follered?" grinned Red Lark, who was well acquainted with the facts.

"Wal," said Daddy, slowly, "I kinder slipped an' fell daown. Ther p'ison skunk wuz goin' ter knife me, but Liz she kivered him with a pop, an' tole him ter slide out. He slid."

"An' I wuz ther feller thet saw him laffin' like he hed struck a reg'ler picnic."

"Gal-dang him!"

"Juan is bad medicine," said Vane. "You had better keep him from your girl, Daddy. He is quite a masher."

"Wal, I'll mash him ef I ever ketch him snoopin' aroun' again!"

"You may give him one for me," said Vane. "But I will have to leave you folks to attend to some business I have on hand."

"Got ter go?"

"Yes."

"Kem up an' hev er drink," invited Red Lark.

Vane declined.

"There is one point I want you to remember," said the Sport. "It is this: if any one touches their forehead with the forefinger of their left hand and speaks the word 'caution,' he is my friend. Do you understand?"

"You bet!"

"Well, remember that. No matter who it is, if he gives you that signal, he is my friend."

"Correct."

"Look out for hot work."

"We will."

He left them and turned toward the door. They watched him till he passed out of the saloon.

"As w'ite er man as ever drored breath!" asserted Daddy Duzenberry.

"I believe you are right," said Leon Forest.

"I like him better the more I see of him."

Outside the saloon Vane paused and mused for several minutes, scarcely aware he was being watched by a pair of glittering eyes.

"Yes, there is hot work ahead!" muttered

Vane. "I almost fancy to-night will see the termination of the crooked game. If my plans do not go amiss, Adam Jayne will meet with a crushing defeat. His trusted tools have been playing to suck as much money out of him as possible, and they would continue the snap; but I shall ruin all their plans. I have deceived them even more successfully than I hoped. I want to catch one of them in such a position that I can make him acknowledge my verdict was a just one. That is the chief thing I have been playing for."

He walked slowly away.

At a certain distance a skulking figure crept through the darkness in his footsteps.

He was being shadowed.

By whom?

Was it Juan Pacheco?

Vane did not long remain unconscious of the fact that he was being dogged, but he made no sign of discovering that was the case. Calmly he continued on his way, seeming quite absorbed by his thoughts. The shadower did not dream he had been detected.

The Velvet Sport passed beyond the corner of a building, and the one who was following him hurried forward, fearful of losing the man in the darkness.

He rushed straight upon a trap, for as he passed the corner of the cabin the heavy butt of a revolver crashed down upon his head, knocking him senseless.

"I fancy that will keep you quiet for a time," observed Violet Vane, as he put up his revolver and walked serenely away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT SLINK'S OFFICE.

ADAM JAYNE assisted his son to stagger through the darkness to the cabin where they were stopping, and stagger Jonas did, for, the excitement of the fight being over, the liquor he had swallowed began to affect his legs. It also made its presence known by his speech.

"Snocked him out 'f 'tadn't—hic!—been f' you, paw," the youth thickly protested. "I wath, gug-gug-goin' t' hit—hic!—him in eye, I wath."

"Oh, yes!" sneered Adam. "I know all about it! Jonas, you made a fool of yourself—a blooming fool!"

"Oh, paw!"

"Oh, rats!"

"That ith—hic!—schlang, paw."

"Well, your actions are enough to make me fall from grace and talk slang! Shut up now and come along. Oh, Lord! that I should ever come to this! Here I am, a devoted parent, helping home a drunken son!"

"Ain't hawf the dwunk—hic!—ath you wath thith mawnin', paw."

"Shut up and come along!"

So Adam aided Jonas into the cabin and, with much difficulty, deposited him in the hammock.

"You can lay there till you sleep off the jag," said the elder Jayne. "Oh, Jonas, Jonas! you will have an awful head in the morning!"

"You—hic!—sthpeak frawm thpwience, paw," gurgled the brilliant youth, as he settled himself and closed his eyes. "Night, ol' boy."

Adam surveyed the picture with unutterable disgust, and at that moment, perhaps, he realized he was in truth responsible for the disgraceful condition of his boy. He had tried to hide his true nature from his son, but the youth had been able to see through the sham and pretense, and he was simply imitating his parent's example.

With something like a groan, the plotter turned and left the cabin. He paused outside, and muttered:

"Old man Duzenberry is in Coffin City; now would be an excellent time to get hold of that girl. I must see Slink and find out what he can do."

He hurried toward Lawyer Slink's office.

There was no light in the office and the door was fast, but Adam gave a peculiar rap and was immediately admitted.

"Ah, is it you, my dear sir?" purred the voice of the oily lawyer. "I was scarcely looking for a visit from you at this time. Remain quiet, sir, while I make the door secure, and I will conduct you to a seat. There it is, and here you are. Sit right down."

"I have come on important business," Jayne immediately began. "It is something that must be attended to at once."

"To-night?"

"Yes."

"Is it possible, dear sir?"

"It must be possible, Slink. Not only must it be attended to to-night, but not a minute must be lost."

"It surely must be important. What can it be, dear sir?"

"You know the old fellow who calls himself Daddy Duzenberry?"

"Surely."

"You know he has a girl? Well, I have taken a fancy to that girl."

There was a pause, as if the lawyer was too surprised to speak, and during that pause Adam distinctly heard the suppressed but gurgling breathing of a third person within the room.

Giving vent to an exclamation of anger and fear, the sleek hypocrite leaped to his feet and caught Elias Slink by the throat, holding the amazed lawyer helpless in his chair.

"You treacherous dog!" snarled Jayne. "So you are playing a double game! I have caught you!"

"Hold on! hold on!" cried Slink. "What are you up to? What do you mean?"

"You know well enough what I mean! There is a third person in this room!"

"Is that all, dear sir?"

"That's enough! You have some one here to overhear my talk! You have sold me out!"

"That is where you make a big error, and you have unnecessarily alarmed yourself and your humble servant, E. Slink, Esq."

"Do you deny it? I heard the man breathing. He is sitting at the right-hand end of the table."

"That is true."

"Then you confess?"

"That there is a man there—yes."

"Oh, w'at yer makin' all this fuss fer?" gurgled a familiar voice. "I reckon I'm in this business with ther rest of ye, ur my name hain't Ben Hogg."

It was the "judge."

"Why didn't you say he was here?" indignantly demanded Jayne, as he sunk panting into a chair.

"You did not give me time, dear sir," cooed Slink. "You plunged into business at once, and I thought it could do no harm for the judge to hear what you had to say."

"What is he in here for?"

"Came in ter tell Slink 'bout ther sad 'fair over in ther Jim Dandy," was Hogg's reply. "Twuz too bad we wuzn't able ter down ther velvet sharp."

"I have put a dog on his trail. But this other business. We cannot lose any time."

"What can you want of old Duzenberry's girl, dear sir?" softly inquired the lawyer.

"That makes no difference. It is enough that I want her and want her bad. More than that, I will pay to get her."

"Thet soun's right," mumbled Hogg.

"But I scarcely understand how the rifle is going to be made," protested the cautious lawyer.

"Easily enough," said Adam. "Duzenberry is in town and the girl must be alone. Three or four of the men can slip down to the cabin and carry her off."

"That might not be so easy; she is something of a spit-fire."

"It could be done if you were with them, Slink. You are great at imitating another man's voice. After you knock at the door, she will ask who is there, then you can imitate Duzenberry's voice when you reply. She will immediately unfasten the door, and the rest will be easy."

"I berlieve it kin be worked, Pard Slink," asserted "Judge" Hogg.

"But where are the boys to go? Jim, Ike and the Greaser are off on another lay. We might try some of the others, but they are not very trusty."

"Then do not try them," hastily put in Jayne. "Why are not you two enough? I will remain behind to watch Duzenberry."

"An' so keep whar yer neck is safe," chuckled Hogg.

"Will you do it?" impatiently demanded Adam.

"How much are you willing to pay?"

"I will give you a hundred dollars apiece, if you are successful."

"Not enough."

"Two hundred each, then—not another cent. You are to take her to some place where she can be safely kept till I am ready to take her away. What do you say? Speak quick!"

"It is a bargain," declared the lawyer.

"We'll scoop her," gurgled "Judge" Benjamin.

The three sealed the crooked compact with a handshake in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST DEAL.

FROM Slink's office Adam Jayne hurried toward the Jim Dandy Saloon, his hired tools having started for the cabin down the creek.

As he was walking along he was startled by hearing the sound of a low groan, which came from near the wall of a low cabin. He halted, his hand seeking the pocket in which he always carried a ready revolver.

"Who is there?" he demanded.

Once more he heard the groan, and again he repeated the question.

A figure partially arose in the darkness, and the voice of Sweet Jim replied:

"It's only me—Jim Cobb."

Adam's hand fell from the butt of the revolver and he instantly approached the figure.

"What is the matter with you?" he demanded.

"Are you drunk?"

"Not much!" moaned Jim. "All ther same, I hev got an awful head on me."

"Well, then what is the trouble with you?"

"Is thet you, Jayne? Then I'll tell ye how it happened. Ye see, I wuz follerin' thet velvet sharp as you wanted me ter. I reckon ther galoot must hev tumbled, fer w'en I rounded thar corner of this yere cabin, suthin' drapped on my head. I jest laid right down hyer, an' hyer I've stayed ever sence."

Adam uttered a snarl.

"Then you let Violet Vane get away from you?"

"Yep."

"Fool! I told you to find the boy and I would pay you well. If you had been sharp enough to follow the sport, he would have led you to the boy."

"Thar wuzn't ary need of thet anyhow. I know whar the kid is."

In another instant Jayne had the tough by the shoulder.

"What do you say?" he hoarsely demanded.

"Don't lie to me, man! What do you mean?"

"It's straight goods, boss; I know whar ther kid is, sure pop."

"Where is he?"

"Stoppin' hyer in town at ther howtel."

At first Jayne could not believe the man was not attempting to play a joke on him, but Jim finally convinced the chief plotter that he was in sober earnest. Great was Adam's anger when he learned how Slink had sought to keep all knowledge of the boy's presence from him.

"I have paid that foxy wretch well to serve me!" he snarled; "and now he would play a double game on me that he might bleed me still further! I will beat him at his own trick!"

"An' I'll help ye, boss, ef ther's money in it," eagerly assured Sweet Jim.

"Well, there is money in it; but how can you aid me?"

"Thet'll be easy. Ye see, Slink hes planned ter scoop ther kid ter-night an' take him ter a cave I knows on. I an' Ike an' a Greaser are goin' ter do ther job arter it gits quiet-like. W'en it is all done, one of us 'll hev ter stay in ther cave an' watch ther kid. I'll work it so they'll leave me. See?"

"Yes; but I want to get hold of this boy to-night. I am not willing to lose more time. How can it be worked?"

Jim remained in thought a moment, then replied:

"Do you know where the split rock is?"

"Yes."

"Wal, you go thar an' lay low. W'en we kerri ther kid ter ther cave, we shell pass thar. You kin foller, but you want ter be mighty sly 'bout it so Ike ur ther Greaser won't ketch on. W'en you see us go through a mess of bush thet sets right up ag'in' ther foot of a puppindiculer wall of stun you kin know we hev gone inter ther cave. Then you jest keep hid tell Ike an' ther Greaser goes erway. Arter they hev, I'll kem out an' whistle; then you kin show up an' I'll take ye ter ther kid."

Adam readily agreed to this plan, quite forgetting he had promised to watch Daddy Duzenberry while Slink and Hogg captured the old man's "gal." At last the arch-rascal began to believe the end of the game was close at hand; success was about to crown his schemes.

He assisted Sweet Jim to his feet. At first the tough was so dizzy he could only stand by clinging to his companion, but the feeling swiftly passed.

"Now, I am all right fer biz," he declared.

"Remember that you are goin' ter pay me five hundred dollars, an' I want ye ter hev ther money with ye w'en ye come ter ther cave."

"You need not worry about that. I have the

five hundred in my pocket, and plenty more to keep it company."

"Then you git ter ther Split Rock an' lay low. Don't ye git narvous ef ye don't see nuthin' fer two ur three hours, fer we'll shorely be erlong afore mornin'. Jest you keep cool an' foller arter we pass."

They separated, Jayne immediately making his way toward the Split Rock, which was nearly a mile out of town.

Reaching the rock, the hypocritical villain threw himself down beside it to await the coming of the kidnappers.

Slowly the minutes passed into hours. The moon finally arose, but the sky was overcast by a flying scud which made the light of the "Queen of the Night" rather fitful and uncertain. In the shadow of the riven rock Adam Jayne crouched and waited, straining his ears and eyes.

At least two hours passed after he arrived there before he saw a human being.

Suddenly he heard a cat-like footstep, and, peering from his place of concealment, he detected the figure of a man approaching.

The man was moving toward Coffin City instead of from the town, so he could not be one of the three who were to capture the boy.

There was something suggestive of the sneak about the almost noiseless manner in which the pedestrian moved along, and from this peculiarity Adam immediately recognized the pedestrian.

It was the oily lawyer, Slink.

Jayne was seized by wonder at the presence of the man. Why was he there, and where was the "judge?"

Slink hurried on and vanished in the direction of the town.

"Go on!" softly snarled Jayne, shaking his clinched hand toward the spot where the lawyer was last seen. "Go on, you blood-sucker! You will never get anything more out of me. I do not believe that girl of Duzenberry's can possibly be Jennie Kenyon, or truly Jennie Jayne. It was nothing but an accidental resemblance. When I have finished the boy the game will be ended."

Another hour passed.

Adam was beginning to become wildly impatient when he heard low voices, and, a moment later, shadowy figures were seen advancing from the direction of the town. The man beside the rock crouched lower.

Three men passed the rock, two of whom were bearing what seemed to be the inanimate body of a third. They were the two toughs, Ike and Jim, and the Mexican, Juan. The inanimate figure was the boy tenderfoot, Timothy Stiles.

Adam did not wait for them to get very far away before he arose and crept along after them. Had he waited a few seconds longer he would have made a startling discovery.

The kidnappers were being shadowed by a small party of men! These shadowers were startled when Adam appeared, and they were compelled to follow Jayne and trust that he would not lose sight of the ones they were after.

The party consisted of Daddy Duzenberry, Red Lark and Leon Forest.

As Jayne took considerable precaution against being detected by Sweet Jim's companions, those who were following him found it no easy job to keep him in view.

"He dodges like a jack-rabbit!" whispered Red Lark in disgust.

"He'll give us ther slip ef we hain't keerful," asserted Daddy.

For a considerable distance they were able to follow the chief rascal of the crooked game, but, quite unconsciously, he finally gave them the slip.

"Didn't I say so!" growled Daddy, disgustedly, when they were certain that Jayne had indeed passed beyond their vision and there seemed no hope of getting sight of him again. "Naow what are we goin' ter do?"

"Ax me suthin' easy," retorted Red Lark.

Leon was greatly excited when he realized they were quite off the track.

For a long time the three continued to search, although it seemed time wasted; but finally, of a sudden they came face to face with two men.

They were Lank Ike and Juan Pacheco!

It was difficult to tell which was the most astonished of the five men, but Daddy Duzenberry succeeded in getting the drop on the tough and the Mexican.

"Hands up, you critters!" he commanded, in a business-like manner. "Be lively, ur swaller lead!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE END OF THE GAME.

INSTANTLY Juan Pacheco lifted his left hand and touched his forehead with his fore-finger, saying:

"Caution!"

It was the signal of which Violet Vane had spoken! Any one who gave it was to be recognized as his friend!

"What's that mean?" snorted Daddy Duzenberry. "You hain't no friend of ther Velvet Sharp!"

"That is where you are wrong!" was Juan's cool reply. "We are the best of friends."

"But you are arter his gizzard!"

"That is all a trick, senor; it was played to blind the eyes of his foes."

It was hard for the three men to understand this, but Juan aided them in making like secure, although that ruffian raved and stormed in a furious manner, berating himself for trusting a treacherous Greaser.

When the tough was fast, Juan said:

"I will now lead you to the cave, senors. I fancy you will find a surprise there. There are two captives, instead of one!"

"Two! Who is the other?"

Juan explained it was Daddy's girl. Slink and Hogg had succeeded in capturing Liz, and, the "judge" knowing about the cave, she was taken there. Hogg was left to guard her, while Slink returned to town.

Cautiously the four men approached the vicinity of the cave, having left like in a helpless condition where he was captured. As they came out close to the mouth of the cave, they were amazed to see two madly battling figures locked fast in each other's grasp.

Only a moment they paused, but as they rushed forward, the contesting men reeled and fell to the ground. There the battle continued till they were torn apart.

Then our friends saw they were Sweet Jim and Adam Jayne!

"He would have robbed me," gasped Jayne, who had been badly cut by a knife in the ruffian's hand. "He saw my money, then he tried to get it all. Five hundred was not enough."

Sweet Jim was disarmed and bound.

"Don't believe that's any need of trussing up this one," was Daddy Duzenberry's observation, after he had hastily examined Adam Jayne's injuries.

The chief villain was mortally wounded.

Within the cave "Judge" Hogg was found guarding the captives, but he was easily made a prisoner.

There was no small amount of surprise when the boy and girl prisoners were found in each other's arms, as if they had been acquainted all their lives.

Jayne and Sweet Jim were brought into the cave, the former being placed with his back against the wall, where the flaring torchlight would reveal to his eyes all before him. His face was very white, and he was rapidly growing weaker.

"Adam Jayne," said Juan Pacheco, solemnly, "your last hour has come; you are fatally wounded, and in a dying condition at this moment. This is the true reward of crime."

Jayne's lips moved, but he uttered no sound.

"Before you," continued Juan, "you see the boy and girl against whom you plotted—children of your own brother, though I do not wonder their mother resumed her own name of Kenton after leaving her husband. You tried to kill the girl—you hurled her into the Mississippi. This young man,"—pointing to Leon Forest—"plunged in after her, and by almost a miracle, both were saved by a floating timber."

"They tracked you here to Coffin City. They came together, but as strangers, Jennie Kenyon being in the disguise of a boy and registering as Timothy Styles. She is two years older than her brother Wallace, but, in boy's clothes, looked so much like him that your tools were deceived and thought her the boy."

"The boy whom you would have destroyed was saved by Violet Vane and given into the care of a friend, Daddy Duzenberry here. Wallace adopted the disguise of a girl, and as such, he looked so much like his sister that even you were puzzled and startled. There they are, and when they exchange clothes, they will be properly attired."

Jayne did not seem greatly surprised by this revelation, although it is probable his injuries accounted for his failure to show emotion.

Being given a swallow of liquor from a flask Daddy Duzenberry carried, he said, faintly:

"I was so near success—I thought! And now—my God—I am dying! But I will have revenge on the wretch who destroyed my life!"

He it was who killed Old Luckless. My money paid for the job, but he struck the blow and fired the shot which ended the old miner's life. For it he should hang."

"He shell hang fer snuffin' you out, pardner," assured Red Lark; "but as Ole Luckless ain't dead, we can't swing him fer that!"

"Old Luckless not dead?"

"Not by er jug-full! I am Ole Luckless!"

Off came the mass of false red hair and beard which had covered his head and face, and the unlucky miner stood revealed!

"Waal, may I be kicked!" cried Daddy Duzenberry. "I hev been an' went an' jumped a livin' man's claim!"

"Sure as shootin', pard!" laughed Old Luckless. "I thought of tryin' ter skeer ye erway by playin' spook, but I kind of reckoned I didn't keer ter be shot full of holes, like a sieve."

"But that's one thing I don't understand," confessed Daddy. "Hyers this Greaser, an' ef I don't smell a rat 'bout him, I'm er Chinaman. They's suthin' 'tarnal natteral 'bout his voice, an' ef he wuz bleached, I believe he would look like somebody I hev seen b'fore."

"You are right," laughed Juan. "When I get to some water, and where I can shift my clothes, I will make a slight alteration in my appearance. Off comes this imperial now."

"An thet makes a big change. Great Scott! it is—"

"Violet Vane!"

Is was indeed the Velvet Sport. With the aid of his ventriloquial powers, he had played a wonderful double game, which had enabled him to become familiar with the plots of those he was seeking to defeat, and thus aid in their final overthrow. So well had he played his part, that neither Daddy Duzenberry or "Liz" had suspected him. It was little wonder he laughed after Daddy caught him making love to the disguised boy.

Adam Jayne died from the wounds he had received, and when they learned the truth, the citizens of Coffin City quickly disposed of the man's murderer, a tree on the outskirts of the town serving as a gallows.

Lank Ike succeeded in bursting the cords which held him, and he at once carried the news of disaster to Elias Slink. Neither of the two were afterward seen in Coffin City.

"Judge" Benjamin Hogg was tarred and feathered, then ridden out of town on a decidedly knotty rail. He also disappeared.

Jonas Jayne was not molested, for he was not considered responsible for any of his father's acts.

Wallace and Jennie Kenyon, with Leon Forest as a companion, went East, and the children did not find it difficult to establish their right to their father's property.

About a year after this, Violet Vane received a beautiful wedding card which bore the names of Leon and Jennie.

Daddy Duzenberry left Coffin City with the Velvet Sport, willingly giving up the claim to its rightful owner, Old Luckless.

Again the daring Sport struck out to wander whither fancy led him. Always, brave, noble and manly, loving right, detesting wrong, ready to spill his life-blood in defending the weak and oppressed, may we not hope to meet him again?

THE END.

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